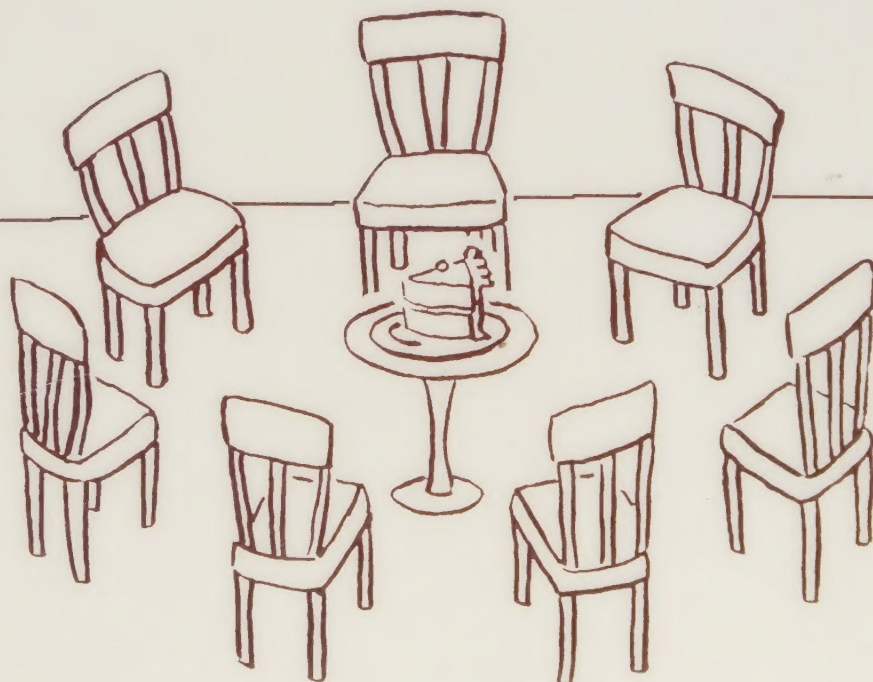


Liz Lerman's

CRITICAL RESPONSE PROCESSSM

A method for getting useful feedback on
anything you make, from dance to dessert



by Liz Lerman and John Borstel

FIRST EDITION

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The use of the Critical Response Process has reinvigorated my belief in public readings as a useful step in the development of a new play. By compelling audiences to examine their experience with the work and form questions rather than opinions, the Process engages them in a closer examination of the work and encourages them to think in specifics rather than generalities.

—Nick Olcott

*Artistic Associate, Round House Theatre
Bethesda, Maryland*

At Columbia College we have applied the Critical Response Process as a dimension of our classroom assessment program. The method has enhanced a culture already dedicated to high educational standards. Use of the Process has fostered values of reflection, collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, mature feedback, respect, civility, and honesty—all vital for effective education.

—John Zubizarreta

*Professor of English, Director of Honors and Faculty Development, Columbia College
Columbia, South Carolina*

In making the transition out of the practice room, chamber and orchestra musicians sometimes struggle to find ways to enlarge their individually-oriented focus into a group dynamic that works for them. They need tools to achieve this. With the Critical Response Process and other innovative ideas, Liz Lerman challenged students in our ChamberFest program in entirely unexpected ways, enabling them to find and create their own tools.

—Bärli Nugent

*Assistant Dean and Director of Chamber Music, The Juilliard School
New York, New York*

Using the Critical Response Process, artists in our Beyond the Studio program developed a clearer understanding about critical feedback and were able to clarify their intent and vision for their work. In a program designed to mentor artists with little teaching experience, use of the Process helped artists better articulate and translate their work into teachable lesson plans.

—Sandy Agustin

*Acting Executive Director, Intermedia Arts
Minneapolis, Minnesota*

The Critical Response Process has transformed Jump-Start. We use the Process to workshop productions, in all our education programs—with young people, children who have been abused, and adults with mental illness, at a monthly work-in-progress series with general audiences, for staff evaluations, at our annual board and company retreat, in almost every situation we can dream of.

—Steve Bailey

*Executive Director, Jump-Start Performance Co.
San Antonio, Texas*

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by Liz Lerman and John Borstel

FIRST EDITION

Illustrations by John Borstel

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Liz Lerman Dance Exch



Liz Lerman Dance Exchange was founded in 1976. Its unique brand of dance/theatre breaks boundaries between stage and audience, theater and community, movement and language, tradition and the unexplored. Through explosive dancing, personal stories, humor, and a company of performers whose ages span six decades, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange stretches the expressive range of contemporary dance. Its work consists of formal concerts, interactive performances, specialized community residencies, and professional training in the art of community-based dance. An artist-driven organization, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange employs a collaborative approach to dancemaking, administration, and implementation.

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. To learn more about the company's diverse programming in performance, education, and community engagement, please contact:

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange

7117 Maple Avenue

Takoma Park, MD 20912

301-270-6700

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ISBN 0-9727385-0-9

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INTRODU

Though critique had been a familiar companion from my earliest days as a child in dance class, I was well established in my career as a choreographer before I finally acknowledged how uncomfortable I was about most aspects of criticism. I had been involved in the process of creating art, seeing art and teaching art-making for a very long time, but I had not found peace with the army of feelings brought up by both giving and receiving criticism, or resolved the many questions that these practices raised. So-called “feedback sessions” often seemed brutal and frequently not very helpful. The ritual of backstage visits after performances presented a perplexing challenge—I had trouble getting what I needed in these conversations, and I had trouble knowing what other artists wanted from them.

I was growing uncomfortable at other people’s concerts when my experience was increasingly defined by my own internal complaining (which was often merely about the fact that the artist was making different choices from the ones I would have made). It became a burden during residencies or grant panels when I was asked to comment on work without knowing anything about the artists who made it. I even began to question the basic premises underlying my teaching of dance composition because I was troubled about the nature of my response to the work being created by my students. I had plenty to say. That wasn’t the problem. But I kept wondering why I was saying it: Was I truly helping my students find their individual voices or was I just trying to create clones of me?

Moreover, when I was at the receiving end of criticism—whether positive or negative, through feedback sessions or newspaper reviews—I had a sense that there was a supposedly mature way to hear comments of others: keeping silent, writing private letters in my mind but never sending them, and, if something really

stung, letting time heal the wounds. To respond in this “mature” way to criticism meant quietly taking it, rather than attempting to engage in a dialogue, since to respond at all was somehow deemed either defensive or a violation of an unspoken boundary.

Related to these concerns was my growing unease about the kind of criticism that people felt compelled to give. Critiques coming from those who had the privilege of holding forth—teachers, elders, critics—often felt like attacks, attacks imbued with a passion that seemed intimately connected with the aesthetic values of the beholder. (Even in the case of “positive criticism,” the artwork sometimes functioned as a lightning rod for unspoken ideas, values, and assumptions.) Since “taking” the criticism quietly was the expected routine, we had no way of straightening out which values were being used as the standard.

At the same time, feedback sessions with peers often failed to move beyond cheerleading to any kind of useful comment. While mutual support was deeply needed in these settings, we were challenged to know how to sustain personal relationships while viewing and commenting on work honestly. As a field, we needed a way to expose the previously unspoken values in criticism and to talk about work so that people could in fact have a dialogue and strengthen their own ability to solve the problems inherent in creative endeavors.

So, around 1990, I began evolving a system of peer response, grounded first and foremost on my own experience as a choreographer. The evolution of the Process began unconsciously as a way of working with the dancers in my company, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, as well as a way of having extended conversations with a few choreographer-friends and with my husband, storyteller Jon Spelman. Through these encounters, I discovered that the more I made public my own questions about my work, the more willing I was to hear other people’s reactions to it. Of

CTION

by Liz Lerman

equal value to those reactions was the process happening on my side of the conversation: I found that if I could just talk about the messes that are an inevitable part of creating new work—talk out loud and listen to myself—I would hear an unexpected way out of an artistic dilemma and new information that could help me make the piece stronger, such as a unifying metaphor or a new idea about structure.

I began to wonder what would happen if critical sessions were indeed in the control of the artist. The Critical Response Process as a formal system that would address this goal began to emerge as I experimented while teaching composition at the American Dance Festival and the Colorado Dance Festival. That is when I noticed that the more I gently questioned my students, the more deeply we could understand their own work. Its motivation and meaning to the creator became the basis on which feedback was given. I found that I could raise all of my concerns through questions and the context they established, and, amazingly, encounter no defensive resistance.

Next I took these ideas back to the peer-to-peer artist dialogues that had had been so frustrating to me. I was soon testing them at the annual meetings of Alternate ROOTS, a service organization for art-makers of varied disciplines in the Southeastern United States. Thus ROOTS provided a crucial testing ground for the development of Critical Response. By publishing my first descriptions of the Process in their quarterly newsletter (subsequently printed in *High Performance* magazine), this organization gave me a forum for bringing it to a wider public and a chance to formulate language representing the Process. Much of that language is incorporated in this publication.

In the decade that has passed since I began using and teaching the Critical Response Process, I have been pleased to watch its progress, both within the immediate circle of Dance Exchange

activities and out in the wider world in the hands of a diverse group of thoughtful and enterprising practitioners. It has been gratifying to see the Process embraced by people in a range of disciplines, for such varied purposes as curatorial decision-making in gallery settings, mid-semester course assessment in higher education, and audience talkback for staged readings of scripts-in-progress. It has continued to evolve—I am still making discoveries about its implications and applications—yet remarkably hold its center in the four original core steps. I've used its principles more and more as a guide for conversations beyond the arts (my daughter's arrival at adolescence has offered particularly fertile ground for this exploration). And whether conducted formally, or simply tapped as a source of ideas for asking and answering questions, the Critical Response Process has helped me constantly in my conversations with peer artists, with people I am mentoring, and in the development of my own artistic work.

I am grateful to the many people who have helped me to think about the Critical Response Process. I especially want to thank the dancers and staff of the Dance Exchange, who over the years have embraced its concepts and helped to make it a very real and useful tool. In particular, John Borstel has shepherded the writing of this book and in so doing has brought his great intelligence and wry humor to bear on the many issues that an endeavor like this entails. He has become a gifted teacher of the Process, and through his many experiences with it has become a wonderful spokesperson for all that it encompasses. Finally a nod to my husband Jon Spelman and our daughter Anna for their endless support.

Liz Lerman



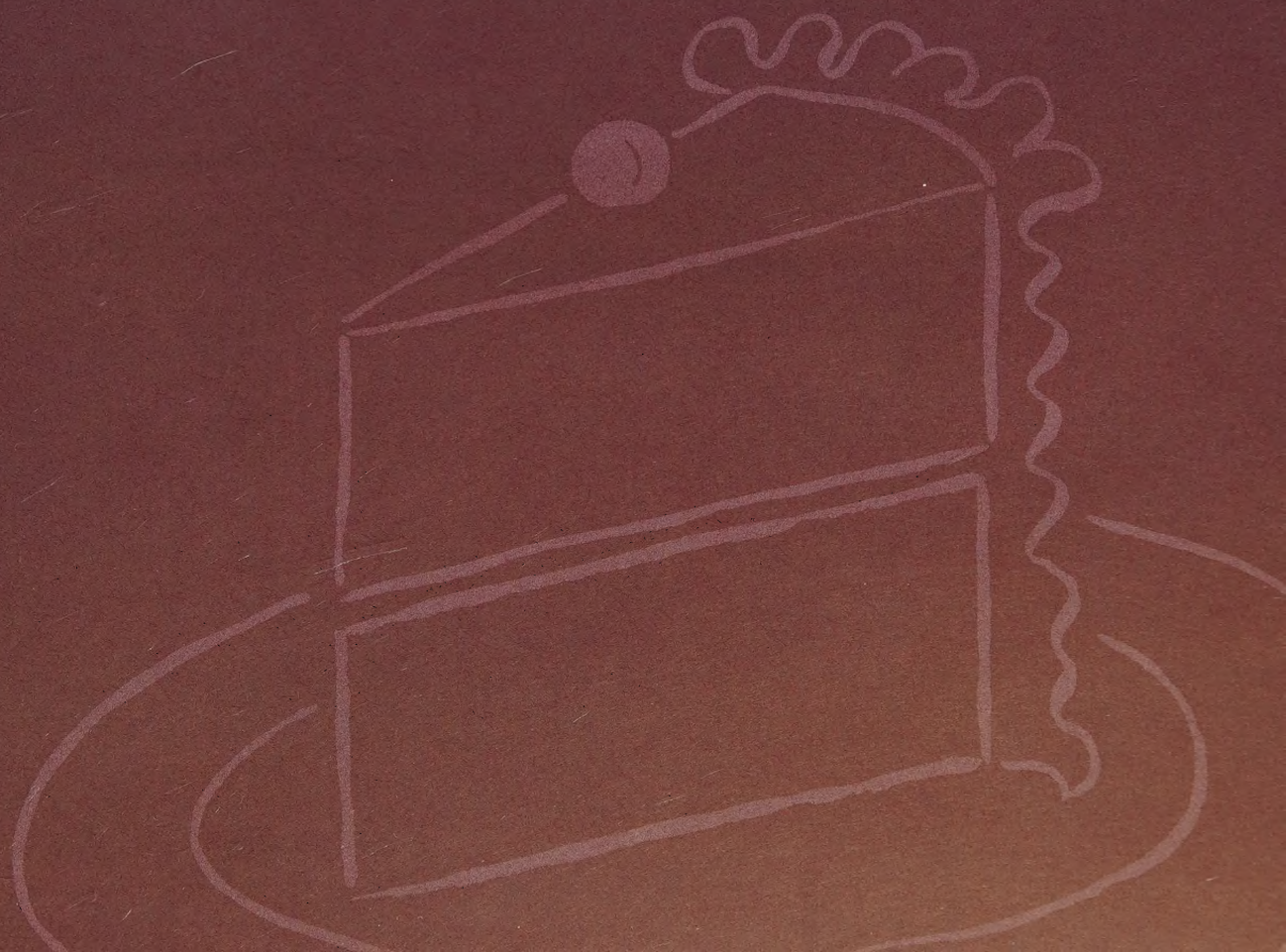
**The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions
which have been hidden by the answers.**

—James Baldwin, writer

**It is the function of art to renew our perception.
What we are familiar with, we cease to see.
The writer shakes up the familiar scene, and,
as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it.**

—Anias Nin, writer/diarist

THE
PROCESS



THE CRITICAL RESPONSE
PROCESS CAN BE APPLIED
TO ALMOST ANYTHING
A PERSON MAKES...

Think of a time in your life when you received really useful feedback. Where were you? Who was talking to you? Exactly what was it that made the encounter so constructive? When the conversation was over, what was your perspective?

These are questions we often ask when we introduce the Critical Response Process. In calling to mind a particular situation or individual, most people can readily name the aspects of the interaction that left them feeling motivated rather than deflated by the criticism. Some will answer the questions by naming specific qualities: respect, trust, specificity, clarity, insight, integrity. Others cite particular approaches that their effective partners-in-critique used in addressing the work under consideration: "He started by pointing out the things that were already working well" or "She asked me some great questions, which left me with a lot to think about."

Contemplating our encounters with people who have a capacity for giving useful critique, it is possible to draw out a set of frequently recurring values and techniques. It's also obvious that when people have the experience of constructive feedback, they want to have it again. The Critical Response Process harnesses the values that most of us can name, taps some of the techniques that many of us have experienced, and combines them into a sequenced system. The resulting Process makes it possible to experience and re-experience the kind of feedback that makes you eager to get back to work on the artwork, the project, or the performance under consideration.



The Critical Response Process enables a group of people to uncover their various aesthetic and performance values and, by being patient, apply them to a creative work-in-progress in a way that pushes the artist's thinking forward. The Critical Response Process can be applied to almost any kind of creative product: new works or interpretations of existing works in dance, theater, and other performing disciplines, not to mention writing, visual art, design, planning, public speaking, curriculum development, teaching processes, almost anything a person makes...even dessert.

The key elements of a Critical Response Process session are the four core steps of the Process and participants in three roles: an artist showing work, a facilitator, and a group of responders. These are detailed in the next two chapters, along with ideas about follow-up. Because much of the technique of effective Critical Response resides in the role of the facilitator, we follow this with some additional guidance for the person assuming that role, emphasizing particular issues that may arise in conducting the Process. In a final chapter we survey a few of the many variations to which the Process has been applied.

This publication is intended to offer a detailed (but by no means exhaustive) introduction to the Critical Response Process. We present it with an awareness of the limitations of the written word to impart a process as elastic and nuanced as this one often is. Since the Process is dialogic and experiential in nature, it is perhaps best learned by doing, so we urge people interested in applying Critical Response to take advantage of the opportunities that the Dance Exchange offers for training in the Process.

... EVEN DESSERT.



**The creative act is not performed by the artist alone;
the spectator brings the work in contact with
the external world by deciphering and interpreting
its inner qualifications and thus adds
his contribution to the creative act.**

—Marcel Duchamp, artist

**When critics disagree, the artist
is in accord with himself.**

—Oscar Wilde, writer

THE ROLES



The Artist

Since a work of art is typically the focus of a Critical Response session, the artist's contribution is essential to the unfolding of the Process. The artist's own attitude walking into the session, in combination with the control that the Process affords the creator of the work under discussion, will vitally influence the direction the ensuing dialogue takes. The artistic task under consideration may be either generative or interpretive in nature, and the product may be at any stage of its development. Artists need to be at a point where they can question their work in a somewhat public environment. They also need to be able to hear positive comments that are specific, not "this is the greatest thing I have ever seen." (Since we all wait for that comment, it can be difficult hearing anything else.) The Process is most fruitful when artists are invested in the future evolution of the art they are showing, or at least in the possibility that they can learn something of value to apply to future projects.



The Responders

A Critical Response session typically engages a group of people who watch, read, listen to, or otherwise experience the work to be discussed. This can be as few as one person or up to hundreds, as when Critical Response is used for post-show discussions (an application discussed further on pages 46-48). Sessions engaging five to twelve participants have some advantages: easier management for the facilitator and the opportunity for more of the responders to participate.

Responders can be friends or strangers, peers or public, experts or novices, all depending on choice and circumstance. Whoever they are, it is important that these observers sincerely want this artist to make excellent work. Occasionally, especially when competition is a factor, people looking at work may not want the artist to succeed, especially on her own terms. While the notion of actively harnessing our responses to the idea of

Their best, not your best

When artists meet peer-to-peer in the Critical Response Process, part of the success of the session lies in the perspective that participants bring to the circle. As a responder, you really want the artist to do *their* best work, not something only as good as *your* last work. The competitive impulse is a useful force in artistic creation, but I encourage people to enjoy the relief of setting it aside for a little while.

—Liz Lerman

another person's excellence may not be achievable in every case, it is always worth striving for.

Are fellow arts practitioners the best responders to an artist's work? The answer may vary according to what kind of feedback artists are seeking or where they are in the development of work. Certainly the tools of the Process have proven very useful for creators engaging people who may not think of themselves as artists: The artist can walk away with valuable information about how the work communicates to a general audience, and the responders will often gain considerable insight from the act of articulating their reactions. Groups that combine peer practitioners with less seasoned viewers may require extra sensitivity from the facilitator to assure that specialists' technical or conceptual jargon doesn't intimidate non-specialists into silence.

The Facilitator

Although these sessions are geared to the needs of the creator, much of the success of a good Critical Response session lies with the facilitator. This guidebook is intended in large part as a primer for people assuming that role. The facilitator's job description includes initiating each step and managing the transition to the next, keeping the Process on track, and assuring that the artist and responders all understand the guidelines and get the most out of them. In these capacities, the facilitator may need to play a variety of translating, coaching, and policing functions. Beyond these basics, the skilled facilitator can choose to play a very active role to deepen the dialogue further. We expand on these possibilities in Facilitation Fundamentals and Deepening the Dialogue sections of this book.

THE FACILITATOR ASSUMES
A VARIETY OF FUNCTIONS:
TRANSLATOR, TRAFFIC
COP, AND COACH.



**When I'm working on a problem, I never think about
beauty. I think only how to solve the problem.**

**But when I have finished, if the
solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong.**

—R. Buckminster Fuller, architect/engineer

Good questions outrank easy answers.

—Paul A. Samuelson, economist

THE STEPS

Critical Response sessions are initiated in a variety of ways: artists schedule dialogues among peers or informally gather a group of responders to see a work-in-progress, teachers adopt the practice for the benefit of their students, and institutions offer sessions as a dimension of their programming in artist support and audience development. The Process can be applied multiple times in the development of a particular work, or employed in combination with other modes of feedback. The focus of a Critical Response session can be a full work or an excerpt, presented in formal performance, informal presentation, or in-class showing. As Critical Response has evolved, we've come to spend more time explaining the steps and sequence before starting the

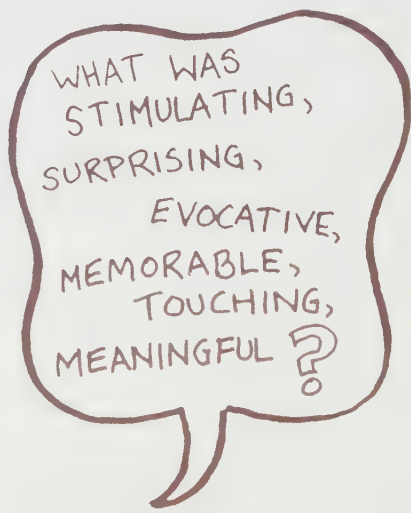
Process, even before experiencing the work under consideration. Knowing what to expect and how each step supports the succeeding ones helps participants to make better use of the Process. Responders who know they will have a chance to express opinions by the end will experience the rigor of the earlier steps as stimulating rather than limiting. If participants follow the sequence of steps with a little patience, mutual respect naturally emerges. Over the course of the Process, even the most disparate points of view can be taken into account through dialogue and response.

When conducted in its formal structure, the Critical Response Process consists of four steps. We will describe each one, followed by ideas for optional activities that can happen after a session.

The meaning of meaning

When I first introduced the Process, I named step one "Affirmation," which encouraged facilitators to start the Process by saying something like "Let's start with affirmations. What did you like about what you just saw?" But now I discourage this approach, as it tends to put the emphasis on the artist's feelings rather than the art itself and how it is communicating. When we start by naming the fact that the work has meaning at all, and offer options for responding to that meaning, we broaden the lens by which responders can experience and comment. The new phrasing encourages responders to be more specific by enabling them to name their experience and affords artists a different way of accepting that information. The whole dialogue becomes less about individual psychology and more about the power of art.

—Liz Lerman



WHAT WAS
STIMULATING,
SURPRISING,
EVOCATIVE,
MEMORABLE,
TOUCHING,
MEANINGFUL ?

CORE STEPS

Step One: Statements of Meaning

No matter how short the presentation, how fragmentary the excerpt, or how early the stage of development, artists want to hear that what they have just completed has significance to another human being. This natural condition can be so intense at times as to appear desperate. It makes sense, then, that the first response artists hear should be one addressing the communicative power of the work just presented. So the facilitator starts step one by asking the responders either “What has meaning for you about what you have just seen?” or “What was stimulating, surprising, evocative, memorable, touching, meaningful for you?” Other adjectives can be employed in this question: “challenging,” “compelling,” “delightful,” “different,” “unique.” The point is to offer responders a palette of choices through which to define and express their reactions.

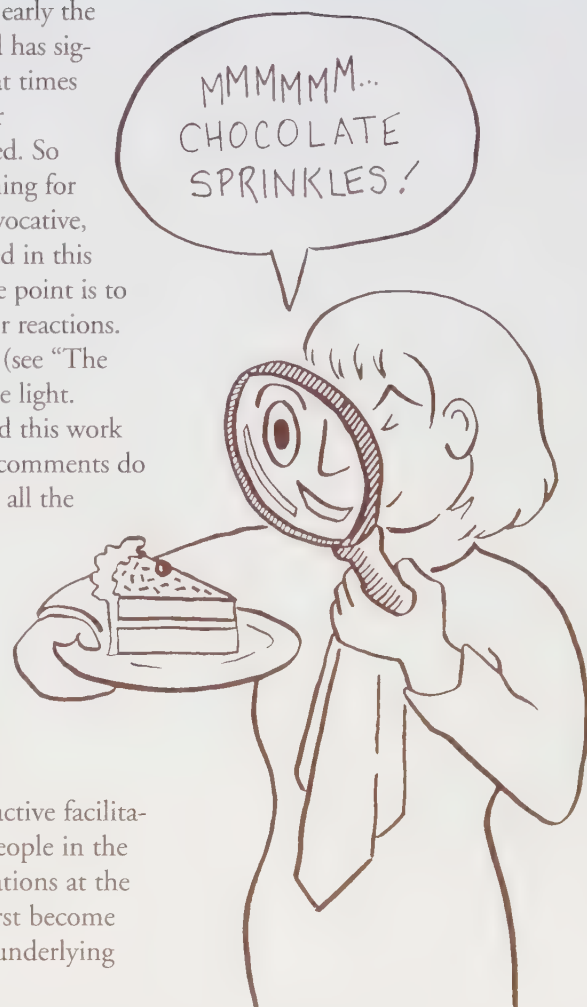
Though we discourage facilitators from explicitly asking for “affirmations” (see “The meaning of meaning,” opposite page), step one should be framed in a positive light. Contrary to this spirit a responder once said, “It is meaningful to me how bad this work is,” a statement that definitely required facilitator intervention. But step one comments do not need to begin “I liked...” If artists only wait for “I liked...,” they can miss all the other ways that people communicate.

Thus the Critical Response Process begins with the philosophy that meaning is at the heart of an artist’s work, and to start with meaning is to begin with the essence of the artistic act. Meaning is a huge category that can hold a wide range of response, a fact often demonstrated by step one. Responders may feel called upon to make broad pronouncements about the work, but artists invariably value hearing about details as well. Nothing is too small to notice.

It is in step one that we can first notice people’s different values. A very active facilitator might draw attention to the variety of aesthetic and social values that people in the circle bring to their role as audience by asking participants for their observations at the end of step one. It is in that moment of group reflection that responders first become aware of the numerous ways people see art, and the array of value systems underlying their differing visions.

Step Two: Artist as Questioner

This step is the first of two rounds of questions and answers. The creator asks the questions first. The more artists clarify their focus, the more intense and deep the dialogue becomes. The facilitator can actively assist artists in forming their questions. Some artists are quite able to analyze their work, and form their dissatisfactions or dilemmas into questions with ease. For others, it is a new experience.



REMEMBER:
NOTHING IS TOO
SMALL TO NOTICE.

In the act of clarifying, the artist has a wide range of choices from general to specific. Facilitators can make artists aware of their options along this spectrum, and how those choices will yield different kinds of answers. General questions often elicit more varied responses, which can be helpful if the artist is seeking a broad survey of reactions to a particular aspect of the work. But when an artist poses her inquiry broadly, she may find that the response is not addressing the issue that is really at the root of her question. Specific questions, naturally, bring forth a more focused and precise commentary. While no prescription dictates which kind of question will be most effective, artists can consider several factors in formulating their questions: Where am I in the process of developing the work? Working from the base of information I've heard in step one, where would I like to expand or focus the response? Do I want an overall gauge of the work's effectiveness, or focused guidance about particular challenges?

Artists should approach the furthest extremes on the general-to-specific spectrum with caution. The most general sort of question—"Well, what did you think?" can mire the Process in some of the usual pitfalls of an open discussion where any topic is fair game and those most insistent about expressing their opinions dominate. Far from opening up the discourse, the breadth of possibility can shut both artists and responders down. By the same token, the use of very specific questions, such as "Did it work when I shifted the mask to the back of my head?" or "Should I have my arms up or down in the final image?" amounts to an opinion poll. This can be useful if the artist is trying to resolve the choice between options and if responders justify their choices. But if these are the only kinds of questions that an artist has, the either/or brand of specificity limits the potential of the dialogue.

Playing a bit closer to the middle of the spectrum can be very fruitful: "How did you experience my transitions from one character to another?" or "I'm working right now on the way I express a strong feeling, so what did you think of the closing section?" Such questions offer responders the opportunity to say exactly what they think and to name some of the specifics themselves.

Artists can always broaden or narrow their exploration with a follow-up question if the original query doesn't yield the infor-

mation they seek. Here the facilitator may need to probe with more questions—not answers—to help the artist find the heart of the matter. (See Sample Dialogue, page 56 for an example of this kind of facilitator guidance.) Often we observe that the artist has the same questions as those watching. When the artist starts the dialogue, the opportunity for honesty increases.

Step Three: Neutral Questions from Responders

The dialogue is now reversed, and responders can ask the artist informational or factual questions. Further, if they have opinions, responders can take this opportunity—in advance of stating the opinion in step four—to form the opinion into a neutral question. Thus, instead of saying, "It's too long," (an opinion) or "Why are your pieces always so long?" (a question that couches an opinion), a person might ask, "What were you trying to accomplish in the final section?" or "Tell me the most important ideas you want us to get and where is that happening in this piece?"

The neutral question presents another aspect of the Process in which the facilitator needs to be active. For many people, forming



A step toward critical thinking

Before adopting the Critical Response Process at Jump-Start, we would tip-toe around each other and never have substantive dialogue. The Process has enabled us, for the first time, to talk about our work in a profound way. In our educational programs and monthly work-in-progress series we often put particular emphasis on step two: it helps artists develop critical thinking skills by learning to ask astute questions, and that is where one can open the doors for critique.

—Steve Bailey

Jump-Start Performance Co.



RESPONDER QUESTIONS:

OPINIONATED...



...AND NEUTRAL

WHAT KIND OF
TEXTURE WERE
YOU GOING
FOR?



a neutral question is not only difficult, but a seemingly ridiculous task if criticism is the point. But the actual process of trying to form opinions into neutral questions enables the responder to recognize and acknowledge the personal values at play. Often these are the very questions that the artist needs to hear.

The neutral question is a common stumbling block for people. Therefore, it can help, when introducing the Process, to lead the group in practicing how to form neutral questions. To do this, the facilitator might suggest a non-neutral question based on a hypothetical work of art (not the piece under review), by posing something like the following: "Let's say that after a dance showing, a viewer questioned the lighting by saying 'Why was it so dark?' Can you suggest neutral way to phrase that question?" The group will soon arrive at a possibility like "What governed your choices in lighting the piece?" (See chart, page 23 for more examples of neutral alternatives to opinionated questions.)

For some people the neutral question may sound like a cover-up for the real action, and it can indeed function that way. But even the most hard-edged, "I-can-take-anything-you-dish-out" artists seem to become more receptive and involved in the critical

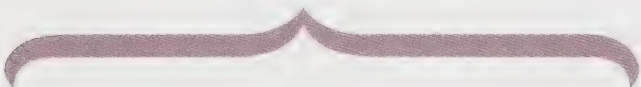
session as a direct result of the neutral question. And the more open they are to the possibility of hearing what others are saying, the more they seem to learn from it.

When defensiveness starts, learning stops. The Critical Response Process emphasizes the benefits of getting artists to think about their work in a fresh way, as opposed to telling them how to improve their work or asking them to defend it. This aim is supported by the discipline of the neutral question. People who are used to giving feedback from a position of authority—teachers, directors, adjudicators—may feel at first that step three makes them sacrifice the right to tell the truth very directly. But many quickly discover that they can say whatever is important through this mechanism, and in the process, get the artist to think more reflectively than he might if the opinion or solution were directly stated. The opportunity for opinions is coming up soon in step four; step three allows the responder to determine the relevance of the opinion and lays the groundwork for the artist to hear the opinion from a non-defensive posture. (For more discussion of "fixing," see "The Challenge of Fixits," Page 42.)

Step Four: Permissioned Opinions

Now the facilitator invites opinions, but specifies that opinions must be offered with a particular protocol: Responders first name the topic of the opinion and ask the artist for permission to state it. For instance, “I have an opinion about the costumes. Do you want to hear it?”

In response, the artist has the option to say “yes” or “no.” The artist may have several reasons for not wanting to hear the opinion: perhaps he has already heard enough opinions about the costumes and wants to move to something else; perhaps he is very interested in hearing about the costumes, but not from that responder, or perhaps the opinion is irrelevant because of factors not yet established by a neutral question, i.e., the costumes used for the showing have nothing to do with those planned for the ultimate presentation. In every case artists have the option to say “no,” or “not right now.”



Opinions like objects

I sometimes demonstrate one of the functions of the “I have an opinion...” permission requests in step four by doing this: While I’m in the middle of my explanation of the step, I’ll wad up a piece of paper and toss it at an unsuspecting group member, who usually flinches and fumbles in response. Then I’ll pick up the paper, make eye contact with the same person and say “catch!,” then toss again, to a now-deft receiver. Opinions can feel very much like objects thrown at us. If we have no preparation we can often feel affronted rather than engaged. But with a little notice and a moment to adjust to what’s coming at us, we can be in a much better position to “catch” the opinion.

— John Borstel



In most cases, however, the artist will say “yes,” because the Process has laid the groundwork for this moment. Perhaps an observer has already transformed an opinion into a neutral question, eliciting a rich and informative response from the artist. Such an exchange may have had several different effects: 1) The responder may have discovered that her opinion was irrelevant to the artists’ intent, so she no longer needs to advance the opinion. 2) She might discover that the artist is so clearly aware of the issue she has in mind that stating her opinion becomes unnecessary or redundant. 3) Or the artist’s answer will leave the responder feeling that her opinion would indeed provide needed information or make the dialogue more specific and hence more useful for the artist. (See Sample Dialogue 3 on page 61 for examples of these scenarios.) This is when a responder will want to take advantage of step four.

Many of our reactions to work, which we may hold to be balanced, informed criticism, can also be viewed simply as subjective opinion. At times artists can use these opinions to help place the work in a larger context. Or artists can hear all of these opinions and use them to weave their own solutions. But artists may not want to hear from everyone, or everyone at that particular time. In step four, the artist can control this moment.

Often during this opinion time, people choose to return to the function of step one and make additional positive statements of meaning. These may reflect new ideas stimulated by the dialogue they have heard since step one.

Throughout step four, the repeated expressions of “I have an opinion about...would you like to hear it?” can strike some participants as stilted and unnatural. Both novice and seasoned Critical Response practitioners have asked, “Do we really have to go through this ritual every time?” But the practice serves several functions. For the responder, forming that initial statement offers a kind of warm-up and mental preparation for identifying and stating the opinion itself. For artists, it affords a chance to readjust their focus to become receptive to a new partner and new idea. Finally, it serves to maintain the Process’s dynamic of dialogue through an exchange that keeps both speakers focused and listening. The step may seem formal, but often the formality, discipline and structure inherent in the Process make it safe for people to go into a more challenging dialogue.

FORMING NEUTRAL QUESTIONS

This chart is designed to suggest a process for forming and coaching neutral questions, a key concept in step three of the Critical Response Process. Keep in mind that not everyone will agree on whether or not a question is neutral or on the best neutral alternative to an opinionated question.

Opinionated Question

Embedded Opinion

Neutral Question

Why is the cake so dry?

The cake is so dry.

What kind of texture and consistency are you aiming for in this cake?

Why is the video so long?

The video is too long.

How are you thinking about time in relation to the viewer's experience?

How do you expect the reader to comprehend this passage?

The passage is incomprehensible.

How are you hoping the reader will experience this passage?

What made you put the entire cast in green costumes?

The green costumes don't work. OR
There are too many green costumes.

What's the significance of the color green to your concept? OR Talk about your costuming choices.

Are the photos in the series intentionally banal?

The images are banal and therefore unsuccessful.

What kind of reaction are you hoping to elicit from a viewer?

Have you shown the text for the brochure to an editor yet?

The text needs editing.

Where are you in the process of developing the brochure?

Have you thought about getting an actor to read your poetry for you?

Your poems are good but your reading is bad.

What would you like to add to our experience of the poetry through your use of voice and gesture?

Why do you think you need to tell the moral of the story at the end?

The moral is obvious, you don't need to tell it.

Where do you want your listeners to be at the end of the story?

Why would you want to draw dead animals?

Dead animals are an unappealing subject.

What ideas do you want to convey through your choice of subject matter?

Do you really understand what this song is about?

Your interpretation of the song shows that you don't comprehend its meaning.

How did you prepare your interpretation of the song?

Why isn't your season programming offering more opportunities to emerging artists?

You aren't offering enough opportunities to emerging artists.

What is your curatorial vision and how does it inform your programming choices?

So, do you always chew gum when you dance?

Chewing gum is distracting or inappropriate while performing a dance.

What's the role of gum chewing in your performance? OR What attitude are you hoping to convey in your performance?



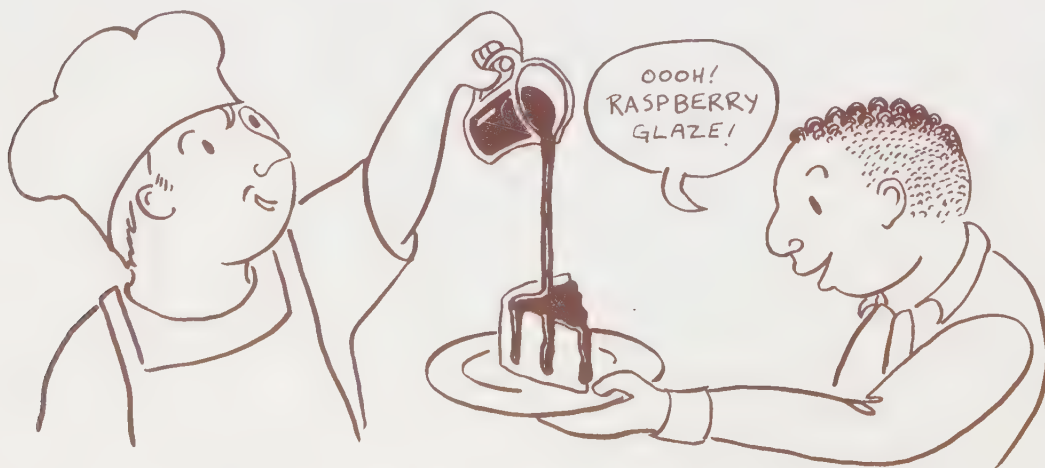
FOLLOW-UP & FOLLOW-THROUGH

Closure

The Process is now complete. If it has functioned well, the responders feel invested and engaged, and the artist has gained a fund of useful, even inspiring, information. At this point the facilitator has several options to bring the Process to closure. Thank yous to both artist and responder are usually in order, and appreciated. The facilitator may ask for observations or request that the artist or a responder offer a summary of the discussion. This can be done by posing a question to the artist like: "Based on what you've experienced in this conversation, what's your next step in working on this piece?" Though occasionally artists need more time to assimilate the dialogue, they usually respond readily and specifically, often with reference to key points they've heard in the session. This short exchange affords artists the final word in the discussion of their work as well as a moment to consolidate the information they've gathered through the Process, while responders get confirmation of the purpose their involvement has served.

New Business, Unfinished Business

At times in the course of a Critical Response session, responders want to get into a discussion about the subject matter of a work, particularly if it broaches an area of social or political controversy. On other occasions an issue of aesthetic perspective or artistic technique will seize attention. The resulting discussions may or may not relate to the specific evolution of the piece, and the emergence of such topics may require the facilitator to make a judgment: Is the emerging issue central to the discussion of the artist's work and can it be discussed within the protocol of the four steps? Can the varying opinions be addressed directly to the artist rather than exchanged responder to responder? Are strong feelings about the issue hindering the Process and will a time-out for a short, managed discussion enable the Process to resume on track? Or, on the other hand, does the group have a need for a conversation about the issue which can nonetheless be clearly separated from the content of the work? In such instances, a subject matter discussion can be added to the session following completion of the Process's four steps. This added discussion is often a viable option as it avoids breaking the momentum of the peer response but addresses the needs of the group. For example: During step three at a Critical Response reviewing a show of regional art at a Midwestern arts center, a responder questioned



SOMETIMES AN ARTIST MAY FEEL READY
TO EXPERIMENT RIGHT AWAY.



the idea of “regional” in relation to New York as the supposed national center for visual art. This sparked a flurry of reactions. It was clear that the topic was vital to many of the participants and that the discussion, if pursued at that moment, would derail the response to the program itself. To meet both of these needs, the facilitator guided the Process through step four and then initiated a discussion of the group’s vital topic.

A discussion that follows completion of the Process can be fruitful for both the artist and the group even when the content is not stirring controversy. An artist discovering that the circle contains people with personal experiences related to the subject of the work might benefit from an added discussion to hear about some of those experiences. When workshopping a piece among peers, an opportunity to discuss points of technique or aesthetics is a chance to draw from the collective wisdom of the group. Facilitators can pose such options to the artist.

Back to Work

By virtue of the fact that we are using Critical Response, we can usually assume that additional work remains to be done on the art under consideration. How the work advances to its next stage is up to the artist. But first steps can be taken during the gathering, and if the group is a class, support circle, or ensemble that regularly meets, a thread can be sustained from the formal Critical Response session into other activities.

Sometimes, depending on the scope of the work and the medium, an artist can feel ready to experiment with changes to the work right away. A dancer/choreographer wants to see what happens if he alters the facings in a section of his work. A poet decides to try reinstating a passage from an earlier draft. A photographer realizes she can re-edit a series by replacing two of her images with other prints she has brought to the session. These changes can be presented to the group on the spot, and the session can return for a few moments into step two to entertain the artist’s questions about new approach.

In teaching settings, the Process can transfer into a coaching mode. Following the four steps, the teacher asks the student where she wants to take the work, or may give directive guidance for next steps, moving immediately to a coaching session where various options are tried and reviewed. The group may continue to be involved as responders, or simply serve as witnesses. Another variation is to engage the group in trying some of the approaches suggested by the session. (see “Sustaining the Critical Response spirit,” below.)

At times work can be developed through a series of Critical Response sessions. When the same group is involved in multiple dialogues about a developing piece, it observes how the artist is using the response to evolve the work. This typically gets the responders highly invested in the outcome and leads them to a deeply informed response.

Sustaining the Critical Response spirit

After Critical Response sessions, I encourage student artists to re-enter the rehearsal/creation process in a similar spirit of inquiry and discovery. The activities I recommend fall into three inter-related, but not necessarily sequential categories : 1) Labbing the work, usually driven by a dialogue between artist and teacher/facilitator and thus engaging skills from steps two and three of the Process. The entire class or ensemble can be involved in this experimentation, sometimes splitting into smaller groups, each seeking its own solution to the same problem. 2) Subject matter discussion, often exploring artistic ideas or social context and drawing on different perspectives in the observer pool. 3) Generating a research list for information that can’t be gleaned from immediate lab or discussion. These activities are not about the teacher making decisions for artists or the group taking over; the goal is to give the artist more: more information, more choice, and a wider view.

—Peter DiMuro

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange

**What we have to do is to be forever curiously testing
new opinions and courting new impressions.**

—Walter Pater, critic

**Literature is strewn with the wreckage of men who have
minded beyond reason the opinions of others.**

—Virginia Woolf, writer

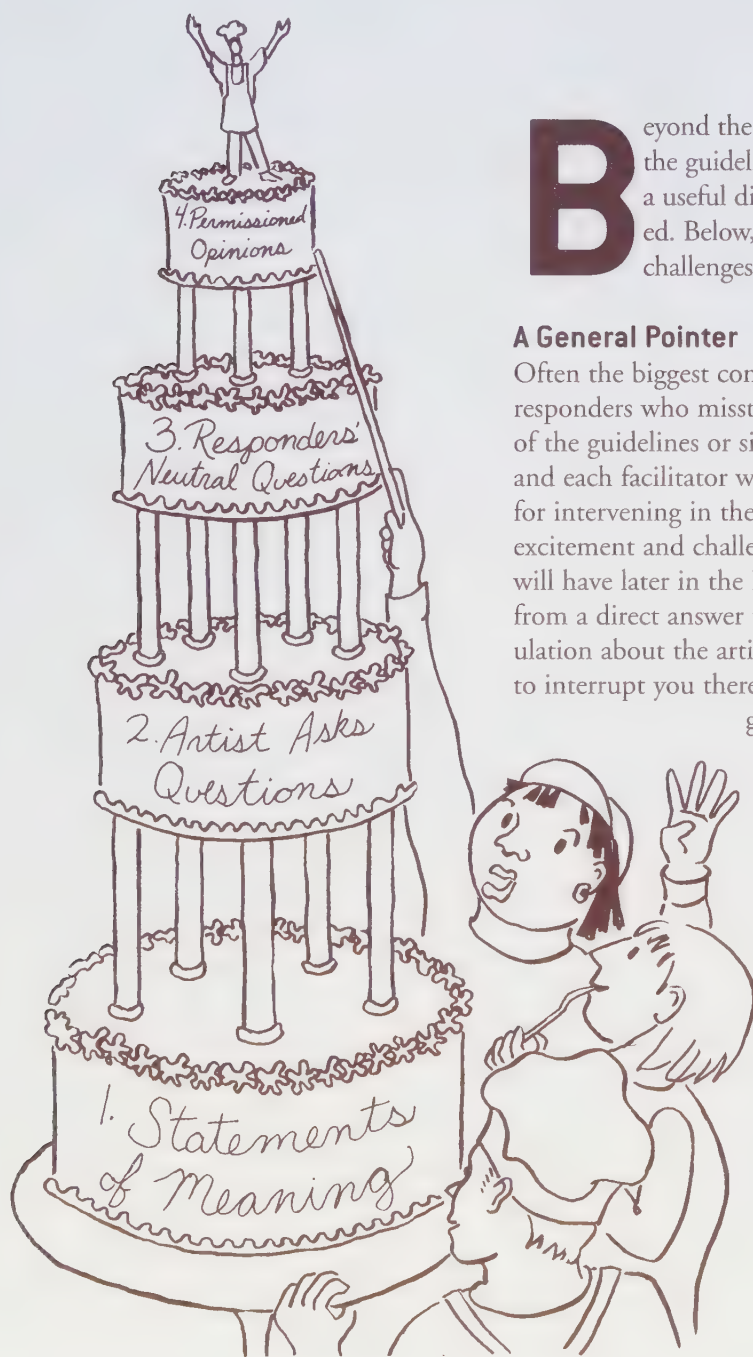
**I think on-stage nudity is disgusting, shameful
and damaging to all things American.
But if I were 22 with a great body, it would be artistic,
tasteful, patriotic and a progressive religious experience.**

—Shelley Winters, actor

FACILITATION

FUNDAMENTALS





THE FACILITATOR SHOULD EXPLAIN HOW THE FOUR STEPS ARE SEQUENCED TO SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER.

Beyond the basics of setting each step in motion and watching for adherence to the guidelines of the Process, an engaged facilitator can do much to assure that a useful dialogue emerges from the Process and that common pitfalls are avoided. Below, presented step by step, are some key practices and advice on meeting challenges that regularly occur.

A General Pointer

Often the biggest concern for a novice facilitator is simply how to manage and assist responders who misstep in the Process, either because they are struggling with restraints of the guidelines or simply misunderstanding the steps. Practice helps with this dilemma, and each facilitator will find a personal style in dealing with these challenges. Our advice for intervening in these moments is to draw attention to the larger context by noting the excitement and challenge of having such discussions and the opportunities the responder will have later in the Process. If a responder in step two moves quickly and passionately from a direct answer to an artist's question to a pointed suggestion or even a hostile speculation about the artist's intentions, the facilitator might intervene by saying, "I'm going to interrupt you there. At a moment like this, I always like to note how engaged people get when they have a chance to talk about new work. At this point in the Process we are focused on responding to the question the artist is posing, so I'm going to ask you to hold on to some of your thoughts for now. As we move to the next step, you might want to think about a way to frame a neutral question about the issue you have in mind, or in step four you might ask if the artist would like to hear your suggestion."

Setting the Stage

Despite its clearly defined roles and steps, the Critical Response Process requires very few formal trappings. It began as a few collaborators and friends conversing in a circle on the floor after a rehearsal, and it can still be as simple and spontaneous as that, occurring with no special setup and little preparation. While it has thrived when incorporated into programming as a structured and planned event, it has also been pressed into service on very short notice. With this range of application in mind, facilitators and other organizers have a variety of factors to consider when preparing for a Critical Response session. As with the followup, setting the stage for Critical



Response is less a matter of following a set method, and more about considering a range of options and finding an approach that fits the artist, the group, and the setting.

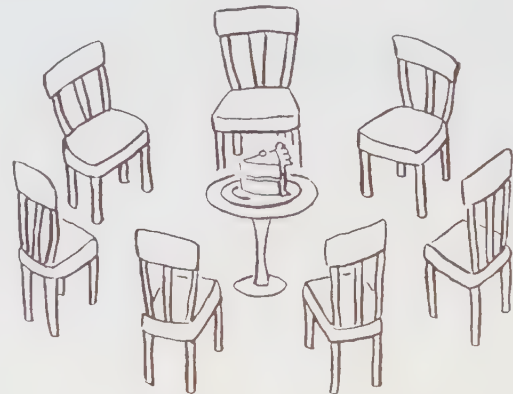
Preparatory Conversation: Though preferences range widely on this point, most facilitators find that a preliminary conversation between the artist and the facilitator is a useful measure. At a minimum the facilitator will want to be sure that the artist is familiar with the four steps and how they unfold, and is giving some thought to questions to pose in step two. Some facilitators like to deepen this preparation by giving artists a chance to talk about their concerns regarding work to be shown, and offering some preliminary coaching on framing the questions. Knowing the artist's key concerns can also help the facilitator to steer the Process more toward the artist's needs.

Whether the facilitator and artist choose an in-depth preparation or just a brief check-in prior to the session depends on several factors. The deeper preparation may be useful when either facilitator or artist is less experienced or assured, or when time is limited for the actual Critical Response session. More experienced facilitators and artists may feel comfortable opting for briefer preparation. Less preparation means that more of the facilitator's coaching of the artist happens during the Process, which can be enlightening for the group to witness, particularly if part of the session's intent is to teach the workings of the Process itself.

While the Critical Response Process is meant to offer artists control in the process by which their work is reviewed, it should also advance and challenge their thinking. Thus the preliminary session should not be employed as a way of coddling the artist. Likewise it should not relieve the facilitator of any responsibility for coaching and intervention during the Process.

Seating arrangement: The best shape for the Critical Response Process is usually a circle, and facilitators should make every effort to move participants into this configuration which promotes participation, exchange, and eye contact, and helps to balance perceptions of power. Within this circle, we suggest that the facilitator sit next to the artist, as this helps the facilitator to stay attuned to the artist's responses, particularly such non-verbal cues

as restlessness or tensing that may signal the need to clarify, probe more deeply, or press forward. Collaborators who are sharing the role of artist should also sit together, allowing them to confer when needed and keeping the responders' focus in one place. In rehearsal or seminar settings, with open space and movable chairs, the circle is easy to achieve; in theaters, face-front classrooms or café/cabaret spaces the circle can be more difficult to achieve, but the effort is generally worthwhile.



THE PERFECT SHAPE FOR
CRITICAL RESPONSE SEATING?
A CIRCLE!

Warmups: As in any activity that involves physical or mental focus and exertion, Critical Response participants can benefit from a warmup, particularly if they are less familiar with one another or unaccustomed to giving critique and response. This can be as simple as going around the circle, prior to a showing, and having each participant briefly mention a recent artistic experience and describe why it was meaningful to them. A more elaborate approach can call on participants to form pairs and practice statements of meaning and neutral questions based on one another's clothing, objects in the environment, or other immediate subjects. The point of such activities is to give participants a chance to practice some of the skills they will be employing in the Process.

Preview: When a facilitator introduces Critical Response to a group unfamiliar with the Process, it is always helpful to review the four core steps, emphasizing how they are sequenced to support one another and to afford openness and receptivity. When possible, doing this preview before the showing or review of work can inform how responders watch and think about the work in question and prepare them for effective participation. Sometimes for newcomers, the Process seems to impose a daunting number of rules to follow. Therefore, facilitators should encourage participants to take risks in the Process rather than to feel hamstrung by its protocols. So it's helpful to say something like "We will all make mistakes as we experience the Process today. As a matter of fact, I hope we make mistakes, because we'll all gain useful insights. So, if you have doubts, I encourage you to forge ahead."

Note-taker: Most artists appreciate having a written record of the session. Because Critical Response engages them as active participants in the dialogue, some artists may prefer not to take their own notes so they can give full attention to the exchange. Others find that writing helps them synthesize the ideas they are hearing. A note-taker can be arranged in advance, or, before launching step one, the facilitator can ask if the artist would like a note-taker, and request a volunteer from the group to serve in that role.

Step One: Statements of Meaning

Balanced Participation: As noted, the facilitator starts step one with a question like "What was stimulating, compelling, interesting, surprising, memorable, evocative about the work you've just seen?" This usually sets in motion a range of varied and specific statements. The facilitator has options for managing this round. She may take responses in no particular order, simply calling on those who indicate that they have something to say. Or she can be more directive, asking each person make just one brief statement, taking turns in order as the opportunity to respond moves around the circle, then opening the response up to further comments. This approach can be useful with medium-sized groups of 10 to 15 responders, because it exposes many ideas quickly and

assures that everyone with something to say gets at least one chance. It can also be a helpful way to launch the entire Process in group dynamics where some participants may need more encouragement to speak.

Occasionally, when the floor is open to comments, a responder will take his role very seriously, and having taken notes during the showing, will use step one to list everything he found meaningful or positive about what he saw. Here a facilitator may have to judge the value of the responder's comments. If the artist appears receptive and the commentary is rich, the facilitator may choose to let the responder continue. But if the responder is at risk of monopolizing the time and energy, the facilitator can intervene

Articulate viewing is active viewing

We often encourage students, particularly children and teens, to use words other than "I liked" or "I loved," in making their step one statements of meaning. This helps them hone their vocabularies and sharpen their skills for watching and articulating. For younger children this may not be easy at first. I therefore demonstrate quite a bit and often translate their comments. If Kevin says, "I liked it when Kayla did the arch on her hands and feet," I might add, "Yes, that caught my eye too, because I could see Cindy on the ground behind her. The shape of her body made an interesting frame for Cindy." Watching for relationships, looking for small details, talking about meaning—step one encourages anyone to be an active viewer, questioner, and idea-maker.

—Margot Greenlee

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange

THE THREE ROLES

Here are some ideas for action and reflection in each of the three roles. In surveying all these options, try to remember that the Critical Response Process is not about getting it right or wrong. It's about making new discoveries in the artistic work, in your own statements and questions, and in what others have to say.

Artist

Responder

Facilitator

Preparing for the Process

... invested in continuing to work on the piece you are showing and open to the possibility that you might change it.

... thinking about what you want to learn related to where you are in the process of developing the work you are showing.

... in an open frame of mind about what you will hear.

... invested in the potential for the artist to do his/her best work.

... thinking ahead to how you will participate in the steps of the Process as you observe the presentation of the artist's work.

... considering what kind of preparation will be appropriate for this artist, taking time, if needed, to meet with the artist in advance.

... assuring that all understand the sequence of the steps and the concepts of the neutral question and permissioned opinion.

... checking to see if the artist would like a note-taker.

Step One: Statements of Meaning

... suspending the need to hear "this is the greatest thing I've ever seen."

... suspending the need to question the sincerity of positive comments.

... attending to your own internal reactions to the comments in terms of how they inform the steps to come:

- Are they answering the questions I have about the work?
- Are they suggesting that I need to probe deeper on any subject?
- Are they raising my sense of curiosity about something new?
- Are they reflecting a consensus reaction or a diverse response?

... making comments that add new perspectives to what has already been stated.

... limiting your response to one or two points when many responders are participating.

... if you have a strong opinion that you would eventually like to make, addressing a related aspect of the work in your step one statement.

... noting the meanings that others have found in the artwork, observing how those comments are expanding your own perception of the work.

... observing your own preferences and points of reference.

... encouraging a broad response with an opening that suggests many possible kinds of reactions (i.e. "What was stimulating, challenging, memorable, evocative, etc...")

... intervening when responders jump to negative opinions or suggestions, reminding them of the opportunities they will have later in the Process.

... drawing the group's attention to the variety of responses elicited.

Step Two: Artist Asks Questions

... building on the information you have heard in step one.

... refraining from long explanatory preambles.

... considering possibilities for two-part questions or general questions.

... ready to narrow questions down when they spill out in groups.

... ready to hear opinions, including negative ones, when they are in direct response to the question you have posed.

... keeping your answers honest and specific to the artist's question.

... expressing opinions, even negative ones, if they are in response to the artist's question.

... listening carefully to the areas of interest and concern that are directed by the artist.

... staying interested in the conversation, even when it is about an aspect of the work about which you may not have a strong opinion.

... encouraging artists to limit their preambles to questions.

... encouraging the artist to phrase in more general or specific terms if the question isn't leading to a useful response.

... helping the artist refine very general questions, or sort through multiple questions that s/he may want to pose all at once.

... encouraging responders to respond to the question by being honest and specific, but staying on-topic with the question.

... intervening when responses to questions contain fixits (suggestions for changes).

THE THREE ROLES (CONTINUED)

Artist

Responder

Facilitator

Step Three: Responders Ask Neutral Questions

... attentive to possibilities and issues that may not be prominent in your current thinking.

... using the dialogue as an opportunity to advance your thinking about the work rather than to repeat what you already know.

... not working too hard to divine the opinion behind the question.

... framing a neutral question about the area of your opinion.

... considering options from general to specific and the possible merits of posing a more general question before a specific one.

... listening to the artist's response for indications that the opinion you have in mind may be either very valuable or irrelevant to the artist's concerns.

... curious about aspects of the work that aren't related to strong opinions (i.e., open to asking questions that are not opinion-driven.)

... reminding responders about the discipline of framing questions neutrally.

... discerning whether questions are neutral, and asking responders to rephrase neutrally when they are not.

... intervening to rephrase a question, or asking responder to refine question, when artist seems "stuck" in responding.

... intervening and refining the query if artist gives a long-winded "explanatory" response that sounds as though s/he is repeating information s/he has stated before.

Step Four: Permissioned Opinions

... listening to the content of permission requests as well as opinions.

... exercising the options of saying "yes" or "no" to a proposed opinion.

... considering how content of this and previous steps is informing your thinking about how you want to continue with the piece you are working on.

... always prefacing opinions by saying "I have an opinion about __ would you like to hear it?" and waiting until artist consents.

... indicating, in your request to the artist, if your opinion contains a suggestion or fixit.

... not loading the content of your opinion into the permission request.

... engaging the artist directly rather than dialoguing with other responders.

... reminding responders about the protocol of asking for the artist's consent to state a particular opinion.

... checking to see if artist wants to hear suggestions as well as opinions.

... asking responders to restate when their permission statements have the content of an opinion loaded into them.

... directing opinions to be stated to the artist, not as seconds or rebuttals to other responders.

... intervening when responders engage in a dialogue that does not include the artist or when they become sidetracked discussing something other than the artwork under consideration.

Wrap-up

... consolidating the most useful information you've heard.

... observing the quality of the contribution you and your fellow responders have made.

... asking the artist to say what his/her next steps are.

... checking to see if artist is open to hearing more from the responders outside the formal session.

... thanking all participants.



with a statement like “Because time is limited, I’d like us to move on so we can hear some other voices. It could be that some of the additional points you have will come up in other people’s comments. If there’s time we can come back to you at the end of the round and see if there’s anything that wasn’t touched on.”

Signaling agreement: To keep the responses diverse, the facilitator can encourage each participant to say something that has not been voiced yet. Here it can be helpful to identify a common signal of assent like head-nodding, gentle “um-hms,” or (popular with some practitioners) two-handed finger snapping. Using such a signal—ideally evident to everyone but unobtrusive to the flow of the Process—enables responders agreeing with a statement to reinforce it without feeling the need to repeat it.

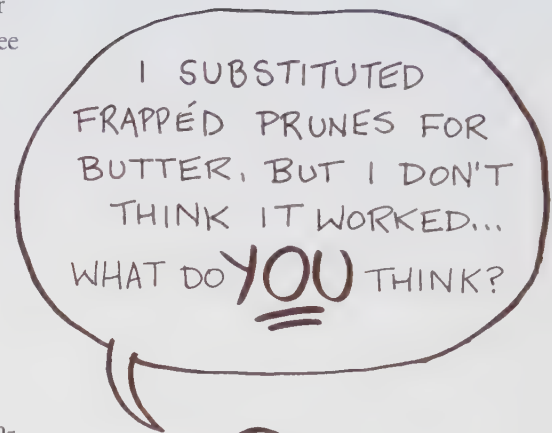
Step Two: Artist Asks Questions

Honing the Questions: In the course of step one, an artist can experience a shift in his concerns about his work and his expectations of the Process. When the opportunity arrives to pose his own questions in step two, he may find that the pressing issues he has brought to the session were actually addressed in the opening round. As a result he may flounder in moving his own inquiry forward. Here artists may benefit from gentle intervention by the facilitator. Sometimes this is a matter of moving to the next stage in the work’s development; but sometimes an artist may need to probe more deeply and specifically into the question that he thinks has been answered.

In contrast to the tongue-tied creator is the artist who is brimming with things to say when step two begins, offering a long explanation as preamble to a question. Because this uses up precious time and may guide responders to the answer the artist wants to hear, the facilitator can remind the artist that the Process will offer more chances to talk about the work, and suggest jumping directly to the question. On other occasions an artist’s questions spill out in groups of two and three, all posed in a single query to the responders. Here a facilitator can suggest that the artist choose from amongst the questions posed or ask, “Do you see those two questions as related, or would you like to ask them separately?”

The dialogue holds greater potential when the artist can pose questions that lead to more than an answer of yes or no. Artists striving for specificity may get stuck on yes/no questions, and the facilitator can sometimes help by suggesting a simple two-part question. “Did you find the piece confusing, and if you did, can you talk about why you had that reaction?”

The idea of the neutral question is central in step three of the Process, but it can also be useful here in step two. Needing reassurance about the work, an artist may angle a question to elicit the positive, or prodded by doubt, may pose a question that leads toward the negative:



DOUBT AND NEED
CAN INFLUENCE
HOW AN ARTIST
ASKS QUESTIONS.

“I’m worried that readers are getting lost in the transition between the two sections of my story. What did you think?” But the most useful answers will emerge when the artist is able to frame the query neutrally. Here the facilitator might suggest “How did you experience...” as an opening, leading the artist to a rephrasing such as “How did you experience the transition between the two sections of the story?” Even if the responders have heard the artist’s negative bias, the revised question will help them to refocus and provide more helpful responses.

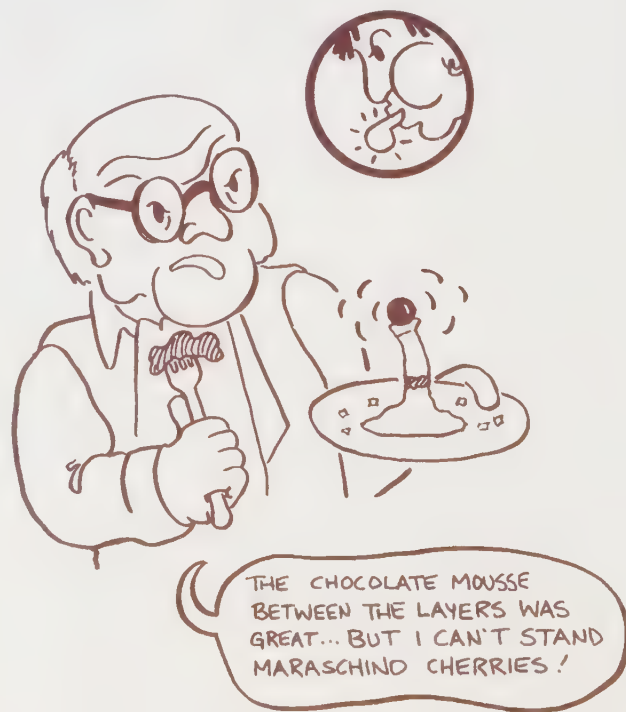
Early Opinions: Facilitators may need to tell responders that opinions are fine, and expected, in step two, as long as they are in direct response to the artist’s question and do not contain suggestions for “fixing” the work. Suppose an artist has posed this question: “I wanted to capture the chaos of the city in these photographs, but I’m trying to balance that content with compositions that have force and integrity. Have I succeeded?” We must assume that the artist wants answers to this question, even if they include a response like: “Well, most of the photos are so artfully composed that I’m really not perceiving the theme of chaos.” Some responders will hesitate to be this direct, either because they are still focused on the positive perspective of step one, or because they are anticipating the opportunity to express opinions in step four. But if the responder waits until step four, the artist may be left feeling that her concerns about her own work have not been acknowledged, a circumstance that can lead her to assume a defensive posture when the final step arrives.

At other times a responder may segue from a direct response immediately into an opinion about something else or to a question of his own. For example, a responder asked about the circle formation at the end of a dance might say, “I loved the circle, but I hate the diagonal that came right before it.” In cases like these, the facilitator needs to direct the responder to hold the question or opinion until the appropriate step.

Step Three: Neutral Questions

Willful Explanations: Step three is the point in the Critical Response Process where the artist has the opportunity to speak at greatest length. Because the Process aims for a dialogue that push-

es the work forward, one of the facilitator’s challenges is to keep the artist in a non-repetitive mode. In responding to questions, an artist can begin to “explain” the work: Rather than speaking about his own explorations, intentions, or inquiry, the artist talks as a way of willing things to be true about his work. When this happens in the Process, the artist’s response will appear to be rehearsed and unspontaneous, and his language will have a definitive quality that does not invite openness to outside comment. The artist treads water while responder waits through the explained response until the real answer comes. The pre-packaged, explanatory response may be of educational value for the group, but the facilitator should ask if the explaining is getting to the heart of the responder’s question and if it will uncover something that truly advances the work. A facilitator who recognizes this can cut in to elicit from the artist “not what you did already but what you plan to do.” This prompt can shift the speaker to a more productive mode of articulation in which he is imagining forward, actually using the act of talking to make discoveries.





Articulating Answers: On the other end of the spectrum from artists with pre-fabricated explanations are those who appear, in the moment, to have a limited ability to communicate. Such an artist, when asked, “Why did you sequence the stanzas of the poem the way you did?” might just say “Hmmm, I don’t know” or “I haven’t thought about it.” At this point, because some prodding is in order, the facilitator might announce, “I’m going to be somewhat directive now,” and phrase the question differently, or ask the questioner to phrase more specifically. By either approach, this deeper-level question might emerge as, “Can you talk about how you sequenced the poem in relation to the story you want to tell? (or the theme, or the relative proportions of the different sections?)” Now the artist must find new words to describe something she may never have addressed before. In the process, the artist who was earlier inarticulate may discover that there was a reason for her sequencing choices.

Funneling Up: Facilitators often want to know how to help responders ask better questions. As in step two, it helps to make

questioners aware of their choices along the continuum from general to specific, and one particularly helpful approach for responders is to start with a more general question and follow up with something more specific: “Can you talk about the audience you are planning to target with this brochure?” followed up with “In targeting teenagers, how did you make your design choices for the brochure’s cover?” For some responders this may require a mental process of “funneling up,” finding the more general query that lays the groundwork for the real question they want to pose. This approach is particularly helpful when discussing an aspect of the work that has not been mentioned earlier in the Process.

Step Four: Permissioned Opinions

Managing Cross-talk: In step four, an opinion may lead to a short conversation consisting of several exchanges between the artist and the responder. This can be informative for everyone, but the facilitator may need to manage the exchange to maintain focus on the work at hand. On other occasions, a responder may impulsively rebut an opinion he has heard, addressing the person in the circle who originated that opinion rather than the artist. The facilitator needs to guide this responder back to the step four protocol and remind him to address his contrasting opinion to the artist, prefaced by the usual permission request. And even when a response builds on a point already expressed, the new speaker needs to initiate again with “I have an opinion...” restating the focus; in other words, stating “I also have an opinion about your use of irony in the first paragraph, would you like to hear it?” not “I have a thought about that too...” or “I have an opinion about the same thing she’s talking about...”

Loaded Permissions: Once in a while a responder will enter step four by saying something like, “I have an opinion about how the title of your picture makes the piece seem didactic,” effectively loading the content as well as the subject of the opinion into the opening statement. Here an alert facilitator would ask the responder to rephrase by stopping short of actually giving the opinion before the artist has granted permission. Sometimes Critical Response is about saying less rather than more.



Education is a kind of continuing dialogue,
and a dialogue assumes, in the nature of the case,
different points of view.

—Robert Hutchins, educator

When I woke up this morning my girlfriend asked me,
‘Did you sleep good?’ I said ‘No, I made a few mistakes.’

—Steven Wright, comedian

DEEPENING THE

DIALOGUE



Critical Response and Personal Dynamics

In spite of its broad and enthusiastic acceptance in many quarters, the Critical Response Process has also encountered some lively challenges and even outright resistance. The varied reactions to the Process probably reflect the broad range of attitudes, aptitudes, mind-sets, and cultural conditioning that people bring to the experience of feedback and critique. While there are no strict predictors for how people will adapt to the Process, it sometimes appears that those who have a hard time being critical or who are especially sensitive about other people's feelings discover through the Process that they can say almost anything that they want. They find the structure liberating and feel comfortable in an atmosphere where the artist maintains some of the control. But for people who are used to being immediately and directly critical, the Process may feel indirect, Machiavellian, and ultimately untruthful.



Strait jacket

Passion and emotion definitely influence the reactions people have to the Process. Many people tie their measurement of honesty in direct proportion to how emotional they are in the moment. For them, to have to wait until step four to state their opinions — which by then have probably dissipated in emotional energy — seems completely dishonest. The problem goes something like this: A person equates his sense of honesty to the way he feels after seeing a piece. (He may keep the passion under wraps, and think that he is actually being very analytical. The emotion may kick in when he is denied the right to respond on his own terms.) He knows he needs to tell the artist the truth as he perceives it. This need far outweighs the premise of Critical Response Process, which is that the artist will not hear what he says because of the emotional nature of the message and because of the timing. The artist sends up a defense system and the dialogue is over. But this responder will feel like he is being told to lie if asked to withhold his opinion temporarily or to form it into a neutral question. For others there is a clear sense that the only way to measure truth is how much it hurts. These dynamics make it very hard for some people to view the Process as anything but a strait jacket.

—Liz Lerman

DIFFERENT VALUES
COME TOGETHER
WHEN PEOPLE GATHER
TO GIVE FEEDBACK.

The Responding Facilitator

How active should a facilitator be? An effective facilitator may choose to be very engaged as a structural engineer, but not to take part in the discussion of the work itself. In that mode, she pays close attention to the flow, timing, and interplay, she offers guidance on framing questions and responses, but she never actually participates as a responder. On the other hand, if the facilitator does choose to take part in the dialogue, it's a good practice for her to ask someone else to serve as facilitator during the moment that she is playing the responder role. She may then reassume facilitation when the exchange with the artist is finished. Switching between roles like this can be especially useful in allowing the facilitator to model particular ways of responding. (If, for instance, a lull ensues shortly after commencing step one, the facilitator can offer a statement of her own to help convey some of the possibilities for statement of meaning responses.) But if the facilitator has a great deal to say to the artist, the assumption of multiple roles can have its limits. In using the Process with students, teachers often assume that facilitating is a natural extension of their mentoring role; but if they also hope to offer their own commentary and guidance inside the Process, they may find that at least one of the roles is undermined by the attempt to play both. Instructors should consider training students to facilitate and rotating this role among the group. This is a valuable experience for students and frees the teacher to be more a more engaged responder. The teacher can still keep an eye on the facilitation and intervene when any missteps occur.

Jumping Back, Leaping Forward

Suppose in the opinion round of step four, a responder's statement leads to a need for clarification, prompting another responder to say "May I ask the artist a question?" Should the facilitator approve moving back to step three? It is often a useful practice, at any point in the Process, to make a brief jump backwards to an earlier step. In response to the above example the facilitator

Letting the Process lead

I use the Critical Response Process in my classes with youth. After they get used to the form, we rotate facilitatorship so that all the students have the opportunity to lead the Process. As a teacher, it's both scary and thrilling to watch Critical Response lead the learning. There are times when I do not even have to be involved—all my comments get expressed through the students using the Process.

—Steve Bailey
Jump-Start Performance Co.

only needs to say "There's a question for the artist, so I'm going to suggest that we move back to step three for a moment."

Sometimes a leap forward in the Process seems appropriate. Perhaps in step three a person asks a neutral question and the artist answers, but the facilitator senses that the dialogue is incomplete. The responder may not know how to ask a follow-up question neutrally, or may be afraid of asking the question incorrectly. In a moment like this, can the facilitator intervene and suggest a move forward into step four for an opinion? Forward leaps like this can be more challenging to manage than backward jumps, as it means moving participants into a step not yet formally introduced. But with familiarity, the facilitator may feel comfortable allowing the Process this kind of fluidity. If, in the scenario mentioned above, the conversation has ground to a halt, the facilitator might encourage the responder to go on to step four, to say that she has an opinion and ask permission to state it. The artist agrees, hears the opinion, and perhaps offers a response. When this conversation is complete, the facilitator brings the entire group back to step three.

Whether advancing forward or backing up in the Process, it is important for the facilitator to state explicitly each time there is a move to a new step. This avoids cross-talk and confusion about

where the group is in the Process. When successful, this kind of flexibility allows a more organic flow to the discussion and usually provides an example of how people use the principles of the Process in one-on-one situations where a facilitator might not be present and a looser structure prevails.



Managing Time

Once familiar with its basic principles, users often begin to experiment with the Critical Response Process. We encourage people to adapt the Process to their needs; this is a living, breathing thing, not a code of conduct to be practiced in an orthodox way. Indeed, in the short history of the Process, many practitioners have evolved their own notable variations and applications, some of which are mentioned in the final chapter of this book.

This principle of flexibility is particularly worth considering in regard to time management. A satisfactory Critical Response session can take anywhere from 30 to 90 minutes, so time does not always allow for a complete four-step Process at every point when an artist might find it useful. This is particularly true when employing it at several stages of a work's development or applying it inside a course of study, where many people will be offering work for response. Here are some practical shortcuts:

- Pose questions, but don't answer them all. In the "Q and A" format of steps two and three, there may not be time to fully address every question worth raising. To close each of those steps, facilitators can ask for artists or responders to state their remaining questions without taking time to answer them. One-on-one dialogue can continue afterwards, but the Process is not bogged down by the need for everyone to get a turn. It's useful for the facilitator to confirm to the group—always making sure that the artist agrees—that the artist will be available later for further responses or questions.
- Limit the number of people who can respond to each artist and spread the responsibility around. When several artists are showing work within a limited time, only a few people are asked to speak about any one artist's work. The rest listen, but take a turn later in the session. The implications of silencing some audience members for the sake of expediency may challenge facilitators to experiment with structures for choosing who talks and who listens, perhaps using a lottery, sign-up sheet, or system allowing artists to choose some or all of their responders.
- Limit which steps of the Process you do. For instance, an eight-week course in storytelling might usually employ

STEPS & SEQUENCE

Through its inner working, each step lays the groundwork for the one that follows.

STEP ONE Statements of meaning: Responders state what was exciting, compelling, meaningful, memorable, evocative.

- * Provides a range of specific information about how responders are experiencing the art work.
- * Draws attention to multiple ways of experiencing the work and diversity of aesthetic perspectives.
- * Establishes positive baseline for discussion, grounding conversation in what is working, what is effective.
- * Gets responders participating, artist listening.

PREPARING FOR STEP TWO...

Artists experience...

- * Confirmation of meaningful aspects of the work.
- * Deeper understanding of how and what the work is communicating.
- * A context for the questions they will pose in step 2.

Responders experience...

- * Range of context for their own reactions.
- * Effect of their responses on artist.
- * Practice talking and a warm-up for deeper dialogue.

STEP TWO Artist asks Questions: The artist poses questions. Responders answer.

- * Initiates two-way dialogue with artist being first to establish the scope of the conversation.
- * Allows artists to state where they are focusing energy or seeking solutions.
- * Indicates to responders what artist may not be thinking about.

PREPARING FOR STEP THREE...

Artists experience...

- * Investment of responders on the artists' terms.
- * Multiple perspectives from which to view their artistic dilemmas.

Responders experience...

- * Understanding of issues artist is addressing in refining work.
- * Sense of value attached to what they have to contribute.

STEP THREE Neutral Questions from Responders: Responders ask questions, phrased neutrally. Artist responds.

- * Broadens dialogue to aspects of the work about which responders are wondering or holding opinions, thus providing additional context.
- * Engages artist in articulating intentions, motivations, background thinking.
- * Engages responders in analyzing their opinions in order to phrase them as neutral questions.

PREPARING FOR STEP FOUR...

Artists experience...

- * A way to advance work by talking about it.
- * Chance to explore topic area of future opinions as a warm-up to hearing them.
- * Opportunity to inform the content of opinions in step 4.

Responders experience...

- * Opportunity to think through the content of their opinion and broach it in neutral terms.
- * Chance to hear background which might inform the expression of opinions in step 4.

STEP FOUR Responders ask permission of artist to express opinions about their work. If artist accepts, responders state opinions.

- * Affords artists a degree of control in what opinions they choose to hear.
- * Exposes full range of responders' experience.
- * Completes a dialogue on terms that both artist and responders have helped to establish.

only the first three steps. Or if students are presenting stories at several stages of development, the course might use only step two on day one and step three the next time the work is shown. At some point in the course a full Critical Response session is done for each student.

The Challenge of Fixits

When asked to respond to work in progress, it is remarkable how quickly we slide from observation, into opinion, and then to a “fixit,” that is, a directive suggestion for a change. The arrival at the fixit can be so unconscious that the responder may need to do some mental backtracking to realize that an opinion underlies the fixit. In fact, suggestions for changes can emerge as early as step one when a responder says, “One of the things I liked about the musical arrangement was hearing the bass played with the bow rather than just as a rhythm instrument. I wish that would have lasted longer.” Already: a fixit. Often in step two, they

occur in response to a question or dilemma posed by the artist: “Black isn’t the right color for the costume. The costume should be red because your dance is about passion.” And certainly fixits will come very naturally to some responders in step four: “Your film about farm workers would be more compelling if you incorporated some oral histories.” As constructive problem-solving, and as an expression of creative impulse, fixits often channel a very positive intent on the part of the responder. But they can be problematic for the artist, and when they emerge in a Critical Response session, it raises the question of whether they have a place in the dialogue and how the facilitator and artist should handle them. The answer depends on the several factors:

- The relationship of the artist to the responders. Sometimes Critical Response can function inside a collaborative process where multiple hands and voices are involved in shaping a work. A playwright drawing some



Multiple opinions, multiple solutions

When facilitating, I used to be very strict about not allowing fixits as a possible variation to the permissioned opinion step, believing that it was vital for artists to find their own way to solve what was missing or needed changing in their work. As I began to facilitate more, I loosened my grip on step four, the opinion stage. I encouraged a range of opinions, as it allowed the artist to see the wide range of potential action—not only taking action on the one professed opinion. I began to see fixits as a close relative of opinion: I now allow fixits but I make sure that there is not only one fixit offered—there needs to be a range of fixits for the artist to hear. This has the same benefit as hearing a range of opinions: the artist realizes that there is an array of possibility as opposed to the predominant, first-articulated way to explore the work.

—Peter DiMuro

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange

of her content from improvisational exercises by a group of actors, for instance, might welcome solutions offered by this collaborating ensemble.

- The preference of the artist and the progress of the work. An artist in the final stages of developing work, still grappling with a problem that he can articulate but not solve, might actively solicit solutions within a group of peers. “I know the song is running on too long. Can you make suggestions about what could be cut?”
- The intent of the criticism. If Critical Response is used in an academic, curatorial, or mentoring setting, where “fixing” work is accepted as a part of a larger program of teaching and guidance, fixits can be useful (though sometimes a shortcut that may compromise opportunities for deeper learning; see “Unraveling a fixit,” right).

To manage these variables, facilitators can take a couple of measures at the beginning of the Process:

- Allow artists to state whether they welcome fixits. This can be determined in a preliminary discussion with the facilitator or asked publicly at the start of the session. If an artist says no, the facilitator may need to intervene in step four, guiding responders who may still want to pose fixits to frame the opinion that underlies the suggestion. If an artist says yes, responders in step four who have fixits should say “I have an opinion that includes a suggestion about ...” or use other phrasing that indicates that their opinion contains a fixit.
- Acknowledge that the desire to get involved in the process of shaping work is natural and creative, but that the artist may gain more if she follows a path to her own solutions. Ask responders who immediately jump to ideas for changes to use steps of the Process to get at the issue that their fixit is intended to address. This may mean encouraging responders to mentally backtrack through the Process before taking part in it: first thinking through the opinion that may underlie their fixit, and then framing a neutral question that addresses the focus of the opinion.



Unraveling a fixit

Once during the early 1980s, I was selected by audition to be part of a group of Washington-based artists studying with a famous New York director. We would each bring a work-in-progress; she would help us develop it, and all of us would get produced at a local avant-garde venue.

I was thrilled by this opportunity. Struggling with a work about the defense budget, I was trying to apply new approaches to combining text and movement. Instead I was feeling quite constrained, especially with one section of the dance. The director watched me do it a few times and made a startling fixit, suggesting I use a ball of string to focus the theme. I complied. I performed the piece. People loved it. Critics loved it. And what they loved about it was the very thing she had fixed. I always felt that I should put an asterisk in the program and explain that the device that made it work was not my idea.

I might have solved the problem myself if she had asked me enough questions: Did I have other tools for making my ideas more concrete? Was there a visible metaphor that could focus the audience's attention? How could I use a prop to convey my meaning? I know I would have grown the creative muscles I needed to develop my own solution.

—Liz Lerman



Nothing in the entire universe ever perishes, believe me,
but things vary, and adopt a new form.

—Ovid, poet

When you come to a fork in the road, take it.

—Yogi Berra, athlete

VARIATIONS



Like a clear melody, strong dance phrase, or cogent image, the Critical Response Process is a theme conducive to many variations. Some of these variations leave the steps and outlines of the Process clearly intact, while others venture beyond the four-step Process, emphasizing the principles of the Process rather than its formal elements. While this publication is not intended to provide detailed guidance on every possible application of the process, we offer a sampling of frequent or particularly thoughtful variations, in hopes that users will gain inspiration from the variety of applications to which Critical Response can be adapted. These variations are organized into three categories: audience engagement (including audience talk-backs and interpretive programming); education (including applications of the standard Process and a variation focused on peer-to-peer coaching); and collaboration (including thoughts about using the Process on creative works engaging multiple artists and a variation to use for group assessment of collaborative projects.)

Liberating a long-standing dialogue

In the small rural community where I work and live, we've developed a tradition of discussion after performance. We all know each other, and the audience wants a chance to say what they think and to ask questions. Over time I became increasingly uncomfortable about hosting these events: I felt as though I was improvising an encore, where I was expected to take in everything with good humor, process it immediately, and present an entertaining response to each comment. It was usually exhausting and demoralizing. The Critical Response Process shifted the weight. Rather than feeling obliged to serve what I imagined the audience's needs to be, I was able to organize the discussion around the needs of the work. Liberating moments were when I just sat still and listened; when I answered that I didn't want to hear an opinion about an issue I was tired of discussing; and when I left a question unanswered, to probe for future investigation.

—Sally Nash

Workspace for Choreographers

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Frequently Critical Response moves beyond the walls of the artist's studio to enter such arenas as an arts center's community dialogue efforts, a theater's audience engagement strategy, or a museum's interpretive programming.

Audience Talk-Backs

As part of their public programming, many contemporary theater companies offer staged readings of scripts under development. Usually followed by "talk-backs," these readings serve both to engage audiences and cultivate new work. Because they focus on a work-in-progress through conversation between artist and audience, the success of such talk-backs is often measured by how well they manage the dialogue. It is probably for this reason that the Critical Response Process has been enthusiastically embraced by numerous contemporary theater companies. Indeed, according to Nick Olcott, Artistic Associate with Round House Theatre in Maryland, without some structure for managing

the audience's participation, "comments invariably turn to the negative and destructive, and the playwright becomes a vulnerable target."

Multi-disciplinary arts centers and dance venues have put the Process to similar uses. In these "talk-back" applications, the Process can be employed in its four-step form with a few minor variations:

- Organizers should recognize the demands made upon an audience asked to take part in a discussion after a full evening of focused concentration. The audience may need a break between the showing and the Critical Response session, and a time span for the session should be announced and observed.



MANY CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS
USE TALK-BACKS TO BOTH ENGAGE
AUDIENCES AND CULTIVATE NEW WORK.

Another option is to schedule a “morning after” Critical Response session, inviting members of the audience to re-engage in discussing the performance the following day.

- The size of the audience for such an event may make circular seating impractical, though if part of the audience leaves and the seating is flexible, it is worth asking people to move their chairs to approximate a circle.
- Not everyone may participate by speaking, but the facilitator can still work to keep everyone engaged by asking them to reflect on their responses and questions even if they don’t voice them.
- Because time will be precious, artists should be encouraged to give advance thought to the questions they want to pose in step two.

Beyond these small allowances, institutions using Critical Response for talk-backs have made their own adjustments to particular steps in the process.

- New York Theatre Workshop likes to introduce the spirit of step four’s permissioned opinion one step earlier, so

that playwrights responding to neutral questions in step three are offered the option to say “I’d like to think about that question, but I don’t want to answer it right now.”

- On the responders’ side, Jump-Start Performance Co. in San Antonio, Texas, likes to demystify the neutral question, emphasizing that the exercise of neutral questions is about a thought process rather than about getting neutral questions “right” by negating opinions or suppressing honest reactions. “We state this up front,” says executive director Steve Bailey, “so that no one feels pressure to create the absolutely neutral question or feels so guilty about having an agenda that they don’t ask their question at all.”
- At the Round House Theatre’s New Voices Playreading series, Nick Olcott stresses close adherence to the guidelines of the Process, suggesting that the facilitator “firmly but good-naturedly enforce the rules, even if the audience members protest.” His variation on step four takes the form of an added stricture: “I have learned in step four never to call on anyone who has not participated in steps one through three. Those are the destructive opinion mongers who have not contributed helpfully to the Process.”

In talk-back applications, one additional variation can be useful with large groups or controversial subject matter, or when responders seem hesitant to talk. After the performance or showing, the facilitator can direct observers to form pairs or small groups for conversations that don't engage the artist. These conversation groups may take two to five minutes to practice step one statements of meaning, or they may even allow for freewheeling opinion at the outset. After this warm-up, the Process can commence as usual, or if many responders are engaged, representatives can speak on behalf of their groups to offer step one comments.

Interpretive Programming

Typically the Critical Response Process addresses artwork that is still underway and artists who are engaged in the conversation about their own work. But aspects of the Process, particularly steps one and three, can be fruitful even in cases where the artwork is complete and the artist is not present (or even alive), such as literature discussion or interpretive programming in museums.

In the step one variation used in these cases, the group experi-

ences the work of art and then responds to the usual "statement of meaning" question: "What was exciting, evocative, challenging, memorable, compelling, stimulating to you about this work?" In a case where a group has gathered to experience an environmental installation, tour a significant piece of architecture, read a poem, or listen to a musical work, this is a simple but potentially profound act, engaging people to search inside their own responses and listen to those of others.

At a later point, in a variation of step three, the group can simply pose questions about the content of the work, the artist's process, and the issue or theme the work addresses. This questioning may follow the usual discipline of neutral phrasing, functioning here not as a step in dialogue with the artist, but to engage the viewers or audience in separating out the aspect of their response that is opinion, personal aesthetic, or bias. This allows for an exploration of the work that is less colored by these factors. If work is controversial or issue-oriented in nature, the neutral questions can encompass the issue as well as the art.

We encourage artists, educators and programmers to think of these variations on steps one and three not as ends in themselves, but as tools to be applied in a bigger context. Their impact will depend largely on how they are combined with such approaches as group discussion, reflective writing, hands-on artmaking exercises or conversations with curators, docents, and scholars.

Collaborative dialogue

The underlying principles in the Critical Response Process can be useful, even when the steps are not done sequentially or with a facilitator. For example, in rehearsal, I may use certain aspects of it in order to get information from the dancers or other collaborators. It has proven especially helpful when I have been really stuck. I will sit everyone down and ask for a step one, particularly if they can articulate what they find meaningful at that stage as dancers. Then I will fire away with my questions. Usually all kinds of ideas emerge that can get me up on my feet and working again.

—Liz Lerman

EDUCATION

Critical Response in the Classroom

Applied in educational settings, the Critical Response Process emphasizes practical learning and the opportunity for students to take the lead in the cultivation of their own work. With its structured approach to group critique, it provides a methodology for a central aspect of the teaching process in the creative arts. As Cynthia J. Williams, professor of dance at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, has noted in her article for *Journal of Dance Education*¹, "Even though many good texts on the art of dance composition are available, there are few texts on the topic of one of the most central activities of the dance composition classroom:

1. Williams, Cynthia: "Beyond Criticism: Lerman's 'Critical Response Process' in the Dance Composition Classroom." *Journal of Dance Education*. Volume 2, Number 3, 2002.

the giving and receiving of feedback.” The point can probably be applied equally to other art forms. Williams describes how the Critical Response Process has enabled her to reverse the hierarchical model of teacher as sole authority, thus affording students more opportunities to learn from one another by exposing their own questions and struggles, and limiting “the nonproductive behaviors of defensiveness.” It also allows both student and teacher to clarify their artistic perspectives. While training students to articulate vision and intention, it enables the instructor to differentiate her aesthetic values from those of the student.

In the hands of a skilled instructor the neutral questions of step three can offer a path for directive learning. In her article, Cynthia Williams discusses how she has often taken a step three question and assigned the student the task of finding multiple solutions to it, which are then shown at the next class gathering. She notes a difference in assignments generated by the Process as opposed to those merely suggested by the instructor, inherent in the “students’ willingness to consider trying multiple solutions not because they were ‘told’ to, but because they were excited by the possibilities and saw the connections between their own intentions and the processes suggested.”

Peer-to-Peer Coaching

Another variation harnesses some of the spirit and practicality of Critical Response toward a form of mutual coaching. This approach focuses on interpretation, technique and performance quality, rather than on the creative aspect of artistry. Originally developed to give students in large dance classes a chance for individualized attention, it evolved as a way of refining performance of dance repertory. This variation is easily transferred to other practices such as public speaking, character interpretation for actors, and instrumental performance:

1. Present work: With a plan to work on a short segment of particular material, participating artists pair into





A crucial role for everyone

I first encountered the mutual coaching variation on Critical Response several years ago when I attended a technique class Liz Lerman taught to senior adults. Since then I have had the opportunity to use this process in classes and in rehearsals with the young people in our Teen Exchange program. I find it incredibly effective in engaging quiet students. Everyone is involved and everyone has a crucial role. When the teens know their peers are watching them, it steps up their performance, with a healthy air of competition. The dialogue turns any icy edge of competition into encouragement. Teens cheer for their partners: “C’mon Emily! You’re gonna get that turn.” When the teens give feedback to their friends about the tough parts of the phrase (often the same parts they struggle with) they are on their feet and are demonstrating with a clarity that improves both peoples’ dancing; it actually reduces the number of times we need to repeat and clean a phrase for performance.

—Elizabeth Johnson

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange

- teams. One performs the material, while the other watches.
2. Responder comments: The watching partner offers a few comments in the form of Critical Response step one statements of meaning, citing aspects of the performance that worked well or were effective.
3. Performer states area of focus: The performing partner now cites an aspect of his performance about which he invites feedback. This is parallel to a step two question, so a dancer might say: “I’m working on my transitions,” a speaker: “I want to vary my intonation without sounding whiney,” or a pianist: “I want the right hand to play lyrically while I keep the left hand percussive.” The performer then repeats the passage.
4. Responder responds: The partner attends to the repeat and responds to the performer’s named area of focus, making the equivalent of a step two response.
5. Responder offers additional focus area: Then, combining the functions of steps three and four, the viewing partner also names another area for the performer to work on, “Think about keeping your movement more fluid across the shoulders,” “Try varying the loudness and softness of your speaking as well as the pitch,” “See what results you get if you use the pedal a little more sparingly.”
6. Repeat and switch: After a final performance of the material, partners switch roles and repeat the process.

When used regularly, this strategy for mutual coaching affords students a chance to be the object of undivided focus while challenging them to assess their own abilities and set their own benchmarks. It can also counteract some of the passivity and self-absorption that certain conventions of artistic training may instill, where students are sometimes conditioned to wait for the teacher or leader to be the taskmaster. In situations like community-based performance projects that engage people with varied backgrounds and skill levels, this approach enables all participants to expand their range by interacting with colleagues who have different strengths and perspectives.

COLLABORATIONS

Multiple Artist Sessions

Artists work together all the time. Sometimes roles are clearly delineated (a composer and lyricist team); sometimes partnerships are highly fluid with two or more partners playing similar roles in relation to the outcome (multiple dancer/choreographers creating an ensemble together); and at times multiple artists can contribute to an effort with one person clearly defined as the leader (a director with an ensemble of actors). The Critical Response Process is flexible in accommodating these different configurations, but because roles and dynamics vary inside artistic relationships, these multi-artist sessions may call for minor adjustments and raise a few issues of which facilitators and organizers should be aware.

It is helpful to consider whether the feedback is being equally shared among the artists, or if the collaborators have distinct roles that may make particular responses more pertinent to a specific artist. This information about roles should be clearly conveyed to the responders, for instance: “As director of this scene, Jane was the primary interpreter, but since the actors are with us, they may jump in to respond at points in the Process.” If it is agreed in advance, ensemble members even may switch between artist and responder roles in the course of the Process; in a case like this, the lead artist should be forewarned that information may emerge that hasn’t yet come forth in the rehearsal process.

Artists sharing responsibility without a rigid delineation of roles (like the dancer/choreographers mentioned above) may want to consult with each other before the session about the kinds of questions they wish to pose in step three. Often such



ARTISTS WORK TOGETHER ALL THE TIME.

sessions involve moments of quiet consultation during the Process as well as moments when one artist refers a question or comment to the other.

In Critical Response sessions that address the work of collaborators with clearly delineated roles (like the composer/lyricist team) artists should make it clear to responders what their particular roles were. For some kinds of work it may be useful to segment the response. If artists agree ahead of time that the approach would be useful, facilitators in step one can solicit statements of meaning first about one artist's contribution, and then about another's, before assessing the impact of the work as a whole.

Adaptations for Collaborative Process

Contemporary performing ensembles, be they dancers, musicians, actors or slam poets, often develop work through such collaborative processes as generative exercises, structured improvisation, or free-form jamming. In such collaborations, the principles of Critical Response can help to prod the process and harvest material of performance quality.

Key practices from the Critical Response Process—stating the meaningful, phrasing neutral questions, and signaling opinions

Internalizing the process

Sometimes I can use the Critical Response Process backwards. I am in a conversation, and I hear something about my work that I could perceive as negative. No permission asked, just opinion stated. In that moment, I have some choices, including to feel bad, angry, or vengeful, or just to sulk. But lately I have used the moment to ask myself “what if this person had asked me a neutral question in order to get me thinking about the problem they are perceiving? What would that neutral question have been?” Then I go about answering the criticism as though I had heard the neutral question. Usually I learn a lot this way.

—Liz Lerman

before stating them—can be applied on their own, without the formal four step sequence, to help advance the hundreds of conversations that take place in artistic collaborations. More structured adaptations can also be applied: everyone might take on an assignment to do some kind of artistic research on a theme, then gather to show what they have developed. After a round of showings, step one-style statements of meaning can be the first step to help to bring forth some agreement about what is useful. Step three-style neutral questions can then be used to prompt the next round of exploration. Or a lead artist can use steps one and two to engage the collaborating ensemble in a conversation that can clarify the juicy content worth advancing (see “Collaborative dialogue,” page 48).

Project Debriefs

A group has collaborated to create an artwork, or to bring a performance or other event to fruition, and some form of self-assessment is clearly in order for the group. Elements of the Critical Response Process can be helpful here, though the usual structure can be problematic; some of the momentum and “dialogue energy” of Critical Response arises from the clear delineation of roles; when the roles break down because everyone can be considered both artist and responder, the Process can become murky. The following variation addresses this dilemma, adapting some of the principles of Critical Response to the task of group debrief and allowing for some planning of future actions.

One person is designated as facilitator to lead the process. It is also useful to have a recorder.

1. State the significant: The facilitator opens the floor inviting participants to offer statements of meaning. This can be done using the usual language for starting a Critical Response session, or it can be more particular: “What was a highlight for you? What was a particular moment of insight or learning? What moment was especially challenging?” People can respond moving in order around the circle, or speak as the spirit moves them.

Co-equal performance reviews

Members of Alternate ROOTS {Regional Organization of Theaters South} had been using the Critical Response Process for a couple of years when we decided to re-structure the staff, moving from a traditional hierarchy {executive director, with supervised staff} to a team of three co-equal directors {development, program and operations}. With an excellent counselor and the help of our executive committee, we worked through the new staff structure and most of its implications. But one of the sticking points was annual performance reviews: who would do them, now that we no longer had a “superior” staff member? Finally, we realized the answer was right under our noses—we would use the Critical Response Process on ourselves! It worked great. We asked rigorous questions of our own work, and of each other. We also created a process for on-going feedback during our weekly staff meetings: state what we had accomplished in the previous week, what we planned to accomplish in the coming week, and what we needed help with. Because we had a note-taker, and because we said out loud what our



goals were for each week and month, there was a high degree of accountability. We were able to question another person’s follow-up in a non-threatening manner; as a result, goals were sometimes re-prioritized. We were also forced to have more realistic expectations for ourselves and for others, which made us a more effective staff in general.

—Kathie de Nobriga, Lisa Grady-Willis and Greg Carraway
former staff of Alternate ROOTS

2. Collect questions: Now the facilitator distributes note cards or self-adhesive notes and asks participants to think about the questions they have as they look back on the experience. Each person writes down one or two questions, one to a note card. While these questions may not need to be strictly neutral, they should be open-ended queries that imply action or responsibility that the group can assume. (So rather than “Why doesn’t the University administration recognize our program and allocate us more money so we can do a better job?” a more apt phrasing might be “What can we do to advocate for more resources from the administration?”) Participants take turns stating their questions, handing them to the facilitator who places them on a board or sheet of chart paper.
3. Organize questions: Now the facilitator, and/or one or two others assigned to the job, takes a few minutes to organize the questions into three or four larger categories. For instance, in viewing the questions, this organizer

- might sort questions into groups focused on artistic quality, partnerships, marketing activities, and followup.
4. Breakout: The person organizing the questions presents the categories to the group for its assent. If no reorganization is suggested, the group then breaks into subgroups for a discussion of each of the question categories. Each group should have its own facilitator and recorder. The breakouts are charged with reporting back to the larger group with findings, reflections, suggestions, and recommended action items. Each group goes to its own area and takes a designated amount of time (30 to 40 minutes is normal) for their discussion.
5. Regroup: Each subgroup takes a few minutes to report on the outcome of their discussion. If future action is recommended, the group should then apply whatever process it uses for decision-making (voting, consensus) and put plans in place for next steps.

C O N C L U

The point when an artist is ready for feedback is as important as any event in the development of a work of art. For the artist, the moment of presenting work-in-progress for response is both one of distinct accomplishment, as hours or months of preparation culminate in a showing and an exchange, and of deep vulnerability, as everything the artist has invested comes under scrutiny. The rigor that applies throughout the artistic process should apply at this juncture: Whether we are printmaking or playwrighting, choreographing a solo or performing a sonata, late-night jamming or poetry slamming, we naturally expect standards for technique in artistic training, protocols for artistic processes and rehearsal, and rules of behavior for audience and artist in the settings where the art is presented. Likewise we should expect that a particular structure, sequence and code of conduct should apply in the crucial moment when an artist says “I am ready for you to experience what I have been making, and it matters to me what you think about it.”

The Critical Response Process was designed with this crucial moment in mind. Whether we call upon the Process on short notice or plan it as a structured event weeks in advance, once it is under way we are in essence saying: Art matters, and this artist is

worthy of our focus. We enter into consideration of this work with respect for its maker, a sense of curiosity, and a willingness to question both the work and our own responses to it. We are willing, for a little while, to suspend other considerations (our own artistic ambitions, our opinions about issues beyond the scope of the work at hand, even our own preferences for human interaction) in the interest of offering a response that can help to advance the artist’s work.

Perhaps one of the core functions of art is to help us live with all the contradictions that life presents. True to its genesis in the realm of art, the Critical Response Process is rich with contradiction. Its basic tenets can fit on a single sheet of paper, but a full exploration of all its possible nuances, adaptations, and vari-

**Remember: Nothing is too
small to notice. When defensiveness
starts, learning stops.
Turn discomfort into inquiry.**

SION

by John Borstel

ations in human encounter might fill a phone book. Adherence to its protocols for facilitation, sequence, neutral questions and permissioned opinions reliably produce a satisfying outcome for artist and responders, but varying and adapting the Process can lead to remarkable discoveries. Facilitator, artist, and responders can all enter into their roles with very little experience of the Process, and trusting in the steps and some very basic principles, derive a satisfying outcome. Yet with sustained experience and a willingness to reflect on the Process, everyone who participates can derive even greater rewards as mastery of its subtleties grows. You can feel reasonably confident in any role in the Process without much practice, but the more you use it the more you will discover.

I would urge anyone who wants to deepen their grasp of the Process to practice Critical Response in this spirit of paradox. If you are just learning the Process, remember you must crawl before you walk. But also remember that you'll never know if you will sink or swim until you dive into the deep end of the pool. Believe whatever you believe about art as fiercely as you can: that it matters deeply to society, that it is vital to sustaining a community, that it makes life worth living. But also realize that the process of critiquing art (any process of critiquing art) is very rarely a life-or-death situation.

This leads to my parting advice for people embarking on Critical Response. Jump in and do the Process. If you are in a situation where you think it would be useful, start using it. Grab any opportunity to assume the role of artist, facilitator, or responder (even if your ultimate goal is to be a good facilitator, for instance, what you learn in the artist's seat will be invaluable). Remember that, whichever of the three roles you play, you will have to hold several thoughts in your head at once. Don't be afraid of making mistakes, and especially, don't be afraid of exposing your own doubt or confusion, since the conversation that ensues invariably will lead to useful insight.

Those of us who've had a chance to learn the Critical Response Process directly from Liz Lerman have had the benefit of her remarkable insight into art and human nature. From all the coaching and reflection she has offered, I can think of no better final words for this primer than three simple but profound ideas that she often states and constantly puts into action. Remember: Nothing is too small to notice. When defensiveness starts, learning stops. Turn discomfort into inquiry.





SAMPLE DIALO

The following fictitious dialogues demonstrate the kinds of conversations that occur when the guidelines of the Critical Response Process are observed. The annotation in the margins notes the dynamic of the dialogue and indicates the facilitator's perceptions and choices in directing the Process.

SAMPLE DIALOGUE 1: Getting to the Heart of the Artist's Question

Scenario: The Artist, a playwright, has presented a scene representing a father confronting an alcohol teenage son. We have arrived at step two in the Process, and the artist is posing her first question.

Artist starts with a concise question, phrased neutrally and intended to elicit an open-ended response.

Artist: How familiar or unfamiliar did the story seem?

Responder 1: I could relate to it out of my own experience since something like this happened in my family; the attitudes of the father character seemed very real to me.

Responder 2: It's not like anything I've experienced, since it's about alcoholism and I really don't have any first-hand experience of that.

Responses continue in a similar vein.

Facilitator perceives a generalized quality to the response and a lack of "spark" in the artist's reaction. Facilitator intervenes.

Facilitator: Is this helpful?

Facilitator notes equivocal tone in artist's answer. He probes.

Artist: Well, it's interesting to hear.

Facilitator: Is it getting at the issue you are trying to pursue in your question?

Facilitator begins to coach the artist to form a more specific question. He starts by asking about the artist's opening query.

Artist: Not really.

Facilitator: Maybe it would help to make the question more specific. Can you state why the categories of "familiar or unfamiliar" are important to you?

Artist exposes the issue underlying her question, supplying additional information for responders as she does so.

Artist: Well, I'm aware that the topic—alcoholism, teen alcoholism specifically—is one that gets touched on sometimes in the mass media, so I guess my hope is that this scene might convey something that an audience hasn't seen before on TV or in the movies.

Facilitator: Okay, do you think you could phrase a question that gets at that?

Artist: Let's see... Compared to other treatments you may have seen of teen alcoholism, did this scene seem like a fresh take on the topic?

Facilitator continues coaching.

Facilitator: Good... and maybe you can add something more specific to that so you get more than "yes" or "no."



GUES

Artist: Okay... So if your answer is yes, what in particular seemed fresh, and if it's no where did it seem familiar?

Facilitator: Great, so now put that all together now into one question.

Artist: Okay... [takes deep breath] Compared to other treatments of teen alcoholism you may have seen, did this scene offer you a fresh take, or did it seem overly familiar? And tell where or what seemed particularly fresh or too familiar.

Facilitator: Great. Do you think that gets at your concern?

Artist: Yes.

Facilitator: Is everyone clear on the question?

Responders nod, signaling assent.

Facilitator: Does anyone have a response?

Responder one: Yes, it seemed fresh to me, and it goes back to what I mentioned before, the character of the father; it seems like you've conveyed his struggle in a compassionate and complex way. It's clear that while he's taking responsibility, he's not positioned as the perpetrator of the son's alcoholism. And you haven't portrayed him as simply the victim of it either.

Responder two: Well now that I understand what you're getting at, I'd actually say yes, it does seem familiar, at least in terms of the emotions: guilt, anger, reproaches, outbursts. That and the business about discovering the hidden liquor bottles; it does seem typical of how we tend to think about this problem. But there were other details—the story about the camping trip, the way the father talks about his divorced wife in that jokey way—those things made it seem to go to a deeper level than something on TV.

Facilitator: (to artist) Is this helpful?

Artist: Definitely!

Facilitator confirms that rephrased question is on target for the artist's needs.

Responder comments are now more specific and focus more on the content of the work under discussion.

Now that she has heard the artist's more specific question, this responder offers a response that contrasts with her earlier one. She also offers an opinion that could be construed as a negative one, but does so in direct response to the question.

Facilitator asks artist if new phrasing is eliciting a helpful response.

SAMPLE DIALOGUE 2: Refining the Neutral Question / Presenting the Opinion

Scenario: The director of a performing arts presenting organization (assuming the position of the Artist in this response session) is presenting plans for the next season's programming to an advisory board consisting of community members and local artists. We are at step three, when responders are asked to pose neutral questions.

Responder starts with a question expressing a strong opinion.

Artist reacts.

Facilitator begins coaching responder to move toward a neutral question...

...facilitator explains...

...responder attempts a neutral rephrasing...

...facilitator continues to coach the responder's phrasing, suggesting a more general query...

...responder arrives at a neutral question.

Artist responds.

Responder: Yes, I have a question. Why isn't your programming offering more opportunities for emerging artists?

Artist: (stiffens) Well, I...

Facilitator: Excuse me, I'm going to intervene here. Responder, I'm going to ask you to find a neutral question through which you can address the issue you have in mind.

Responder: That wasn't neutral?

Facilitator: No, because operating in that question you have an assumption and an opinion about what the programming should be doing.

Responder: Oh. Okay. Let's see... How have you considered opportunities for emerging artists when planning your season?

Facilitator: You're moving in the right direction, but I think your opinion is still evident in that question. I'd suggest you try a somewhat broader question, then maybe we can follow up.

Responder: Hmm. (Pause) What is your curatorial vision for programming and how is that reflected in the plans for the coming season?

Artist: I can talk about that. The mission of Western University Arts Center is first to serve the University community, and secondarily the city as its largest performing arts complex. As such, it's our mission to balance attractions that have broad appeal with the dominant demographics, and to program in three areas we've identified as supportive of the University's charter: Multi-cultural programming, classics, and innovation. You'll note that each of those categories will be offered as its own series, and we also have the dance, music, and family series that cut across those three categories. Our decisions are also influenced by our primary venue, which is a 1,800 seat auditorium: we have to consider the appropriateness of attractions to a venue of that size as well as our ability to sell that many tickets. Finally, while we are independent of the university's departments of theater, music, and dance, we attempt to complement the programs that each of those presents in the recital hall and black box venues at their end of the campus.



Responder: That's informative, thanks. Can I try a more specific question now, and I'll try to make it neutral?

Facilitator: Go ahead.

Responder: What role do you envision for emerging artists in your programming?

Artist: I think I'd be happy to answer that question, but can I ask for a clarification?

Facilitator: Sure.

Artist: Can you tell me what you mean when you say "emerging?"

Responder: I guess there are lots of ways to define that, but I'm specifically thinking of young classical musicians playing solo and chamber repertoire.

Artist: Okay that's helpful. Thinking about classical artists, except for major-name soloists, it is very difficult to fill the house, and chamber music is a particularly hard-sell in an 1800 seat theater. There is a small but loyal audience here, and I think they're being well served by the music department's season in the recital hall, which at 300 seats is really a more appropriate venue.

Responder: Yes. Okay, thanks.

Dialogue continues with other responders. After the facilitator introduces step four, the same responder re-enters the conversation.

Responder: Okay, so I have an opinion about what we were discussing, the lack of opportunities for emerging artists, would you like to hear it?

Artist: Well, alright...

Facilitator: Just a moment... Responder, I think you've started to express your opinion even in the request.

Responder, having learned some background from the general query...

... now poses a more specific question.

Artist and responder clarify terms.

Artist answers the more specific question that the responder has posed.

Responder is ready to offer an opinion about the topic she has put forward in step three, but begins to reveal some of her opinion in her opening request.

Artist reveals some resistance.

Facilitator intervenes.

continued on next page



SAMPLE DIALOGUE 2, continued

Responder acknowledges,
rephrases.

Artist assents.

Responder voices opinion,
referencing information that the
artist shared in step three.

Artist responds (this is allowable in
step four, but not required).

Responder: Oh, right. Let me try again. I have an opinion about the role of emerging artists in your programming, would you like to hear it?

Artist: Certainly.

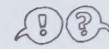
Responder: I understand about the limitations of the theater and I agree that it's not good for chamber music. But the problem is that the Department of Music is presenting only graduate students and faculty, with the occasional guest artist. So there's a category of artist who never appears here, and no opportunities for local artists who don't have the University affiliation. I also wonder about whether the young artists could actually play a role in helping to build a bigger audience for chamber music, which might actually expand opportunities for both the artists and the Arts Center.

Artist: Can I respond to that briefly?

Facilitator: Yes.

Artist: You've expressed your concerns really clearly, and it's definitely an issue I've heard from others. If there's an answer, it probably will lie in the Center's cooperative relationship with the University and some options we've started to examine for shared programming that would give us more access to the other venues on campus. I can't guarantee you that the situation will change over night, but we are beginning to look at it. And I'd love to hear your ideas for how young artists could help to build the audience, so maybe we can talk later.

Responder: That would be great.



SAMPLE DIALOGUE 3: The Informed Opinion

Scenario: A choreographer is showing a work-in-progress. The cast of eight dancers is outfitted in costumes of an identical shade of emerald green. The responder finds the color garish and distracting. In step three she poses a neutral question. (This dialogue posits three different responses from the artist, each with a different outcome on the part of the responder.)

Question

Responder: What's the significance of the color green to your concept?

Response 1

Artist: Well the piece was inspired by the process of photosynthesis, so green seemed like the natural choice. I don't think the concept is quite right yet, and I'm talking to the designer about painting and dyeing the costumes to get more of a range of shades, because I'm not really happy with this one unvaried shade.

Response 2

Artist: Green? Oh, because of the costumes? Actually I probably should have said that these aren't the costumes I have in mind; I just wanted a straightforward look for this showing, so I borrowed the costumes from a woodland piece we do as part of our in-schools program.

Response 3

Artist: Well the piece is pretty abstract, and I wanted the dancers to have a unified look. Green actually isn't a color you see used for costumes very much... there's even an old tradition that it's bad luck to wear green on stage... so I thought it would make a bold statement.

Dialogue advances into step four, where the same responder re-enters the conversation.

Responder: I have an opinion about your use of green, would you like to hear it?

Artist: Yes.

Responder: I appreciate what you're saying about wanting to have a unified look and make a bold statement. But I experienced this shade of green as a little overpowering, and actually distracting from the movement. Green has strong connotations on stage—you know, Robin Hood, Peter Pan—so unless you really want to bring those connotations into the mind of the audience, you might want to consider another way to achieve the unity and boldness you want.

Responder understands that the issue that her opinion would address is already on the mind of the artist, so she does not need to put forward her opinion.

Responder discovers that her opinion is irrelevant to the artist's plan, so she does not need to put forward her opinion.

Artist's response suggests to responder that her opinion might be useful to the artist. In step four she does so.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A dedicated group of advisors contributed considerable time and careful thought to reviewing the manuscript for this publication. With the detailed commentary they offered, they made a substantial impact on the ultimate content of this book. By design, some of these reviewers were well-versed in the Critical Response Process and others were new to it, but all demonstrated a deep investment in the success of this publication. With deep gratitude, the authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of this group: Representing the Schimel Lode (which also offered generous financial support for this publication) were Lily Garcia, Shari Garmise, Ruth Schimel, and Amy Swauger. Artists, educators, and independent consultants responding to the manuscript were Andrea Assaf, Caron Atlas, Steve Bailey, Kathie de Nobriga, Dorothy Lappe, Julian Kabenge, Sally Nash, Jenice View, and Cynthia Williams. The review team within the Dance Exchange consisted of Peter DiMuro, Joy Gill, Margot Greenlee, Jane Hirshberg, Elizabeth Johnson, Celeste Miller, Gayle Stamler, Marvin Webb, and Martha Wittman.

We are also indebted to those who made written contributions to this publication, most of which appear as bracketed side bars or comments on the inside front cover: Sandy Agustin, Steve Bailey, Greg Carraway, Kathie de Nobriga, Peter DiMuro, Margot Greenlee, Elizabeth Johnson, Sally Nash, James C. Nicola, Nick Olcott, Bärli Nugent, Cynthia Williams, Lisa Grady-Willis, and John Zubizarreta.

The Critical Response Process has evolved over the course of innumerable encounters during hundreds of workshops and Critical Response sessions. We learn something new about the Process at practically every encounter, and many of those insights have been incorporated into this book. While those who have furthered the understanding and practice of Critical Response are too numerous to name, we want to thank all the institutions that have sponsored the advancement of the Process by hosting workshops, and each person who has offered an insight or taken a risk in the context of a session.

Publication of *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process* was made possible by the generous support of:



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National Endowment for the Arts

Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, supported by the Ford Foundation

American Festival Project

Schimel Lode

Additional major support for Liz Lerman Dance Exchange during the development of this publication was provided by: the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County, the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, the Dallas Morse Coors Foundation, the Maryland State Arts Council, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, and the Open Society Institute.



LIZ LERMAN, co-author and originator of the Critical Response Process, is a performer, writer, educator, choreographer and Founding Artistic Director of Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, based in Takoma Park, Maryland, near Washington, DC. Her innovative work has been seen throughout the United States and abroad. Recognized in 2002 with a MacArthur "Genius Grant" award, she has also received an American Choreographer Award, the American Jewish Congress "Golda" award, the first annual Pola Nirenska Award, the D.C. Mayor's Art Award and Washingtonian Magazine's Washingtonian of the Year. Ms. Lerman's work has been commissioned by Lincoln Center, American Dance Festival, Dancing in the Streets, BalletMet, and The Kennedy Center. From 1994 through 1996, Ms. Lerman directed and collaborated with The Music Hall in creating The Shipyard Project in Portsmouth, NH. She conceived and directed the *Hallelujah* project, a national initiative in which the Dance Exchange created a series of celebratory dances through collaborations in 15 communities from Maine to California between 1999 and 2002. Ms. Lerman is a frequent keynote speaker and panelist for arts, community, religious, and educational organizations both nationally and internationally, and has consulted with such diverse organizations as Synagogue 2000, Harvard University's Saguaro Seminar, and the Juilliard School of Music. She is the author of *Teaching Dance to Senior Adults*, published in 1983. She is married to storyteller Jon Spelman; they are parents of Anna Clare, born in May 1988.

Illustrator, is Humanities Director for Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, a position he assumed in 2000 after Director of Development. Working closely with Liz Lerman, he has conducted training in the Critical Dance Exchange's summer institute series and for organizations including the Association for Fundraising Workshop, Washington's Arena Stage, Philadelphia's Asian Arts Initiative, and Seattle's Cornish College. Before joining the Exchange, he worked as a puppet-maker and a graphic designer and developed educational materials for Central Pennsylvania Opera Theater. As a visual artist, John's work in collage and photography has been commissioned, and he graduated from Georgetown University where he majored in English.

award-winning Principal and Creative Director of Kabenge Design, a graphic design and communications firm focused on solving. Julian received her BA in Graphic Design from Marymount University and has designed annual corporate identity packages and other collateral materials for a variety of organizations. Her firm's client roster includes the AARP, the University of the District of Columbia, the American Marketing Association—DC Chapter and Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. Samples of her firm's work can be found at www.KabengeDesign.com. Julian is also a professional dancer and has performed East African dance and drama at the Kennedy Center, the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, and the Blues Festival, to name a few.

Liz Lerman's

CRITICAL RESPONSE PROCESSSM

A method for getting useful feedback on
anything you make, from dance to dessert

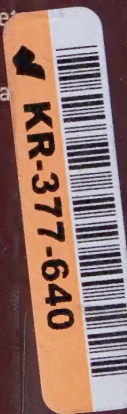
Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process is a multi-step, group system for giving and receiving useful feedback on creative processes and artistic works-in-progress. Originated in the early 1990's by choreographer and MacArthur "Genius Grant" Fellow Liz Lerman, the Process has been widely embraced by artists, educators, and administrators. It has been applied in such diverse contexts as choreography classes, post-performance discussions, actor/playwright collaborations, curatorial decision-making, and university level curriculum assessment. In addition to reflecting on the work at hand, the Critical Response Process affords artists a voice and a degree of control within the critique of their work while promoting dialogue with audiences, fellow artists, students, mentors, and other colleagues.

This book, *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process*, offers a detailed introduction to the Process, beginning with its three roles and four core steps. With particular emphasis on the role of the facilitator, this illustrated publication offers guidance on how artists and participants can get the most out of the Process and the opportunities it offers to ask questions, give answers, and voice opinions. A final chapter discusses adaptations and variations. Charts and annotated sample dialogues demonstrate the inner workings of the Process.

In supporting the creation of new work, we have found Liz's Lerman's Critical Response Process to be the best tool we've ever encountered in assisting individual artists at the most vulnerable stages of creation. The Process empowers artists and invests responders with real responsibility as audience members.

—James C. Nicola, Artistic Director
New York Theatre Workshop
New York, New York

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange www.danceexchange.org



ISBN 0-9727385-0-9



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